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PENDING HEAVEN

A Novel By

WILLIAM GERHARDI

New York HARPER & BROTHERS *London*

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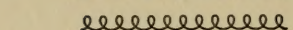
PENDING HEAVEN



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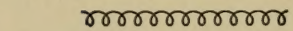

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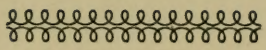
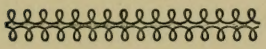


DEDICATED
AFFECTIONATELY
TO MY MOTHER



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Pending Heaven

Because they do not know how to respect, to enliven the present, do they long so for a better future, flirt so much with the past.

—GOETHE.

CHAPTER ONE

A Heavy Heart

I

AS THE little steamer came into sight of the isthmus the sun, like a warm blessing, lit the wide strip of water and kindled a memory in Max Fisher of a state of well-being native and near to him, from which he had been sundered. When was it? Where was it?

And above, inarticulate with the mystery, towered the mountains. Behind lay Toulon with its enchanting little quay and its sailing-boats, the black garrison, and the isolated little life, all in a dream.

And there, standing hatless on the jetty, was no doubt his host, Victor Thurbon. Now the steamer was coming alongside, but backing away again obstinately. Two able French seamen with pompons on their caps were holding it on a rope, and young people were jumping ashore. Elderly ladies waited for the wide gap of water to narrow itself before venturing cautiously to step across. Max felt he ought to have jumped,

but he was portly and did not, and smiled to his host on the jetty: "No heroics! We meet as sober realists."

They had never before met, having alighted on each other's books by a happy chance and continued a correspondence that had lasted over several years to this moment of meeting. Modest men outwardly, both deemed themselves heroes in private, and with the facility for invoking images which is the privilege of the literary man, Victor Thurbon, stepping forward to welcome his guest, said that this long-awaited meeting of theirs recalled another of historic interest—of Bonaparte with Alexander I in 1807 at Tilsit.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Not bad!" laughed Max Fisher. Victor knew it was a happy thing to have said on the spur of the moment, and it came spontaneously from his lips as he greeted his guest on the quay of Tamaris. But he had thought of it twenty-four hours before, in his bed. Victor had a genuine admiration for Max Fisher's person and books, whereas Max's approval of Victor's novels was couched in words like "not bad" or "not without merit." But Max had readily responded to the younger man's enthusiasm because it was the only one which so far had come his way.

A little boy called Loulou had seen Max Fisher arrive and reported at once to his mother that *"l'anglais"* has a visitor—another *"anglais."* Loulou saw everything and reported everything to his mother, a shrewd, gossiping, but illiterate peasant woman. Within an hour the little peninsula of Tamaris knew of Max

Fisher's arrival. He had stirred more curiosity by arriving in a Midi village than by giving three books to the world. As a writer Max was quite unknown; Victor less so. Max's arrival had been heralded by highly enigmatic telegrams despatched from London, Paris, and various stations on the P. L. M. "The man is in a panic," Victor had thought. "One might think he was being pursued by lions. Has he committed a felony and wishes me to hide him? What can it be?"

And now flinging himself into a deck-chair on Victor Thurbon's red-tiled terrace which faced a wide perspective of rapturous open country in bloom, Max Fisher without further prelude addressed himself to the business which had brought him thus far.

It was like this. He coughed. He cleared his throat. He took off his hat and threw it on to a chair, revealing an exceptionally high forehead. Mild eyes, which made Victor think of Heine's verse—". . . *ein toter Mann mit leidend sanften Mienen.*" "He is a little portly," Victor thought, "and red-faced. But he has a forehead, eyes, and nose like Shakespeare's. What a wonderful man!"

"I say, it's beautiful out here," said Max, looking round and inhaling. Tall pines stood on the hillside, and through the clearing one could see the blue bay.

"Wait till dark," Victor said, "and you will see the green lights of the breakwaters which guard the entrance to the harbour. Paul Morand speaks of them—emerald they are and beloved by sailors." Victor

stretched out his hand and displaced a volume from one of the shelves surrounding him. "I have arranged these things so thoughtfully that as I sit here, very snug, I can get any volume I want without getting up for it. I despise effort."

He opened the volume. "This is *Rien Que La Terre.* He describes how, coming home from the East, he sees across the rain-stained windowpane of the saloon these lights, outposts of France, and this subdued home-coming recalls another, the frenzied joy of American passengers when, suddenly, out of the sea, emerges their New York. A country of hope, strength, healthy children, easy money, faith, unclouded outlook. Hats fly in the air, the orchestra rages, old folks dance as if bereft; all join, speak, intermingle. Here, this bleak November evening, on this sad unheated boat, return a band of tired and disgruntled colonials, modest prostitutes perfumed with adversity, soured, badly paid officials, anxious fathers, enemies of risk, people who since leaving France have seen their fortunes vanish by half, opium-smokers, silent and bitter-tongued; all are dumb, prone to turn their backs. After a month's crossing, of lively friendships and too much talk, all detest each other. . . . Have we become, he asks, the tartest of that race of Europe the tiger is said not to like on account of their acid flesh? These are the actual lights, green—emerald," said Victor eagerly.

"I follow," said Max. "But I can't see them."

"Not at this hour," said Victor tartly. "Morand's

attention was drawn to these lights by Edouard Bourdet, of 'La Prisonnière' fame, who lives over there on that cliff with his beautiful wife. I believe in insinuating a visitor into the atmosphere of a place with the least delay."

"Hence the digression, I suppose—a short cut, what?"

"Over there," repeated Victor, "Bourdet with his beautiful wife."

"I am sure she's beautiful. But why this warmth?"

"Oh, well, two solitary years, you know, on this peninsula is apt to make one speechless on occasion."

"Not speechless."

Victor was silent.

"Well," sighed Max, "I am sure all this is very interesting—especially to you, old man. I have noticed that guides in museums seem to enjoy their information more and more as the years roll by. It grows on them, you know. They take it out of the visitors. I am new to this place. I've scarcely arrived half an hour ago. Have pity on me." He leaned back in the chair voluptuously and inhaled a lungful of the sea air. "Ah, well!"

It was a June morning. Bees swarmed. The sun stood high and stung this jungle of vegetation, spurred it on to live and die rapidly. "We'll talk of you, then," said Victor, "if that is what you prefer."

"Not a bit," said Max. "I note this is the actual view, the authentic thing, make no mistake about it. But I am a bit off colour, a bad listener these days. The

fact is I've had a bad year. A wife, you know, and other troubles."

"I heard you were married. I thought happily."

"Ye-e-e-s. I know. . . . Poor girl! I suppose she meant well. All wives who have driven their husbands crazy have invariably meant well." He heaved a deep sigh, and said: "Ah! Life! Life!" Then relapsed into silence.

"You were saying you've had a bad year—" Victor gently prompted.

"Yes. Several. But the last has been the climax. Married fifteen years. The war in between. Meanwhile my wife—well, one changes, especially women. They become difficult, you know, jealous, all that sort of thing. . . ." He paused and then went on developing the subject along general lines. There were, if one looked round, a great many disconsolate wives; and they were invariably women who were in love with their husbands. The husbands, it would be gathered, were no longer in love with them. They may be in love with some one else. Or they may have grown tired of love, their wives' intensity having exhausted them. Whether their nostrils dilated with indignation, or whether they suffered in silence, such wives imported an element of righteousness into conjugal affairs the sequel of which was often to be read in the police court news and not infrequently at the Old Bailey. For righteousness when coupled with intensity will cause husbands to scream and tear their hair out. Max wiped

his forehead. Usually, he said, while his vision seemed to concentrate on his own case—usually they were wives who meant to be everything to their husbands. And there—he grew warm with reminiscence—was their awful mistake. No human can hope to be everything to another human without presuming to a great deal more than a single human can possibly be worth. A wife who fondly believed that she was "everything" to her husband could not realize what a mug he must be to content himself with so little. He paused, and repeated: "With so little." On the other hand, her presumption must be colossal if she imagined that she alone incorporated for him all that was worth while in the rich and varied realm of the "eternal feminine." Such egotism carried its own penalty. Max's lips tightened; a stern look came into his eyes. For the vanity of women who presumed that they were all-sufficient to their husbands tired men, and they neglected their wives for other women, thereby striking at their vanity. The punishment fitting the crime.

"Well," he sighed, "a neglected wife has her remedy. She should go away and stay away. If, when she returns, her husband shows no obvious pleasure at seeing her again, she should go away again. And stay away a long time. This may bring him back to his senses. Or it may not bring him back to his senses. At any rate, while living away from him, she will have the possible satisfaction of thinking that it might, and the certain

satisfaction that it ought. If, when at last she comes home and finds that, contrary to expectation, he has not come round to her way of thinking, she will be secure in her knowledge that naught can be done with him—or that it is not she who can do it. Then she is entitled to shoot him."

"But before she goes to extremes," interposed Victor, "there is one more thing she can try. She should seek solace elsewhere, but—this is important—not outside her husband's profession. She should let her husband know it, and he should learn that she finds the change agreeable. If her husband is a decadent poet, she should fall in love with another decadent poet and insinuate to her husband that her lover despises his poetry and considers it *vieux jeu*. If her husband is a timber merchant, her new lover should also be one, and she should complain of the quality of his timber and tell him that her lover considers him an outsider. In this connection it occurs to me we are both writers."

"I should be only too glad if, in any way . . . Poor girl . . . "

"Shall I go?"

But Max looked as though he thought Victor was making light of a serious subject. For this was not the end, but only the beginning of his troubles. He had resolved to leave his wife and was arranging to provide for her when —— But Victor must not misunderstand him. No doubt Victor now was at the cynical stage out

of which he, Max, had just emerged when he met Sheila, some months ago in the Tyrol where he had gone to spend a holiday in the Austrian Alps. There, in a mountain hotel in a pinewood clearing, he came across her, an English girl of sixteen, travelling with her aged and disagreeable guardian, an extraordinary old man looking like some strange big bird, a London confidence trickster as it happened, who had adopted Sheila at the age of ten. Well-to-do, having made his peace with God and the metropolitan police. This was love, deep love at last. And it was responded. One winter afternoon they had sat on the mountain slope hand in hand, looking at the long line of the Alps. Nothing was said between them. But it was the greatest experience in his life. When they parted he vowed he would not leave a stone unturned to obtain a divorce from his wife and marry Sheila at once. The same evening after they had kissed in the mountain twilight she left with her queer, tongue-tied old guardian for London, and Max went back to his wife and made a clean breast of it. He told her that this love was of an altogether different order, on an altogether different plane. He thought she would understand. But she failed. Utterly! Cries, threats, hysterics. Horrible! He got wind that she had appealed to her father to stop him and that the father was about to get in touch with Sheila's guardian to frustrate all his plans. He dashed to London and called on the guardian, who had a flat in

Grosvenor House. He found the retired confidence trickster ill in bed, his head bandaged, a tremendous nose projecting out of the turban-like headgear, making him look like an enormous, brooding, wounded hawk, or a demon—*"Der Geist der stets verneint."* Max was received aloofly. He had come, he said, to warn Mr. Zeitz that he would shortly receive a visit from Max's father-in-law, who was determined that Max should not divorce his daughter and marry Sheila. Let this impending visit not disturb him. But the guardian, towering above the blankets, said, "He has just been here." And then added, a little sadly, "And has left his gloves behind." And then, severely: "Go back to your wife, sir. You are obviously not a fit person to associate with my ward. Nor do I wish to be a party to ruining your married life. Good morning."

"Good morning." But it was the worst morning of his life. Going down in the lift, Max thought of the things he should have said and hadn't. He knew Mr. Zeitz had an income of fifteen thousand pounds a year, and Max should have conveyed to him his appreciation of his clever past. Further, to put him in a responsive mood Max might have mentioned that he, too, was in some ways a rebel against society, a poet who instinctively recoiled from the existing state of things. Allowing himself to be preached at by a retired confidence trickster. A pretty state of affairs!

And outside on the pavement whom should he

knock against but his father-in-law, business-like, determined, a solicitor carrying an umbrella and a despatch-case and going back for his gloves. A struggle ensued on the pavement, the porters of Grosvenor House looking on shocked. "Let me pass, sir, let me pass, sir," he snapped, and pushing Max aside with his elbow, ran up the stairs of Grosvenor House.

The result of it was that Sheila was sent off to a school at Oxford. Max obtained the address, but when he saw her her attitude had changed. Her guardian, she told him, had forbidden her to see him, and his father-in-law had represented to her the impropriety of her behaviour, and the poor child had promised to comply with their wishes. They parted on the pavement on a rainy April afternoon. She gave him one long kiss and ran back to school. He had written to her since, but either she did not get his letters, or she did not write because she would not break her promise.

His wife and father-in-law came to his hotel when he got back to London and affected a genial air as if they had disposed of a ticklish situation to the benefit of all concerned, inviting Max to return home, holding out a promise of forgiveness, provided always that he made himself worthy of their munificence, a stroke of generosity which prompted him to jump into a taxi and fly to Victoria and thence to Paris, from where he wired to Victor that he was coming south to see him. And here he was.

There was a long pause, during which both speaker and listener sighed appreciatively.

II

Coming out into the road, Max found that he was short of French money and changed, before Victor could stop him, a five-pound note at a tobacconist's kiosk. He lost about one hundred francs on the transaction, but said: "So long as I don't let the matter worry me, what does it matter? Come on, old man," he exclaimed as he took Victor by the arm and marched him on as though he and not Victor were the resident. Max strode capaciously, his arms swinging to and fro; he walked thus with a sudden burst of initiative as who might say: "Come on now, old man; we'll show 'em what we can do!"

Never had Victor Thurbon had such a visitor. They came out into the road and passed the interesting (to Victor already too familiar) sights: the tanning factory which emitted a foul smell, the pig farm which contributed to the admixture, the canal which carried it a distance, till, walking out of the reach of this perfumery, their nostrils began to catch whiffs wafted to them by the wind and indicating the proximity of the slaughterhouse, the *abattoir*.

"How well you have arranged your life," Max exclaimed, turning round to get a fuller view of sea and landscape, while Victor, who once had thought

so and now was only conscious of the dust, the stone, the heat, the smell, the dullness, thought: "How badly!" And, by contrast, Max Fisher's life appeared to him remote, distinct, romantic; and he conjured up pictures of a romantic girl pining for him in an English cloister, so much more alluring than the girls and women who had come his way.

Now they boarded an open tram, the clanking familiarity of which palled on Victor. But he noticed that Max sat beside him with a wondrous smile; and when an Italian peasant passed them in his donkey-cart Max murmured beatifically, and when, screeching, they curved into Toulon past a slatternly old woman who was hanging out her washing, Max waved his hand to her, and when she smiled he said these folk of the Midi were hard to beat for sheer excellence of human nature.

"We get off here," said Victor. "I know of a good restaurant here with the incomparable name *Escargots Enragés.*"

Presently the two friends were lunching in a *brasserie* on the boulevard de Strasbourg. The striped awnings shut out the sun and ensured a cool interior, and the town, having reached this midday hour the crest of heat, relapsed into a sort of nervous amazement at its own power of endurance. Max fumbled with his pocketbook and presently produced two snapshots. "These will convey to you her charm better than any words of mine can do."

Victor examined the snapshots with eager benevolence.

"She's not a bit like her picture, of course," Max hastened.

"One never is."

"My father cried when I failed to get a degree at Oxford. But now that I have fallen in love and suffer hell he doesn't care. Just like them!" Then, looking round, "The south is sad, more oppressive than the north."

Victor wondered at this man with the Shakespeare forehead and the eyes of a doe, wondered at his twitching face which denoted nervousness and sensibility of a dire kind. This unsteady frame, so finely attuned, trembled on the brink of disaster. "I have had a bad year, old chap." And indeed another such year, another such month, and this sensitive apparatus might go to pieces. Yet, Victor noticed that when Max was not bristling with nerves he was shaking with fun, he was trembling with laughter like a wet tree in the wind. He was on the brink of a nervous breakdown; yet withal so witty, so full of fun that the two men laughed and laughed all the time. Yet suddenly in the middle of the day Max had to resort to his bed to snatch an hour's sleep. It was a necessity unknown to Victor, who slept soundly seven hours of the night and never lay down in the day. But Max took off all his clothes and pulled on his pyjamas—how strange, Victor thought—because he had had a bad year!

"Well, well! Join you in a couple of hours," Victor had said, and strolled alone across the square and past the Dames de France and through the Champs de Mars and the little streets on to the quay. Victor wore a thin, transparent shirt, white flannels, and a blazer, and the sunny breeze which walked the streets of the sea town enveloped his body under the shirt and made him want to laugh. Never had he known such a companion. But never! He had lost the habit of friendship. And here was the very man for him: a great, sensitive, witty being, boisterous, tender, and refreshing like the sea breeze.

When Max looked out from the open window of his hotel bedroom the sun was on the point of diminishing its light over the station square. It was a spring evening, and in the mild hustle of the streets after the closing hour, in the leisurely puffing of arriving trains which sent whiffs of pink smoke into a panting sky, in the proximity of the sea wafting reminding breezes, there was something that exhilarated and soothed, a benignant joy, a promise which was also a longing, like a pain, for the things this life, it seems, cannot give.

"It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. . . . Not because life doesn't matter, but because nothing is in vain." Here he lay in an unfamiliar bed, immersed in a life curiously strange, as if hiding something tremulously real under the heat and burden of the day. "It

is," thought Max, "like the anxiety of a late-comer who, arriving at length at a party, realizes in the light and felicity of it all that his troubles and perplexities of awhile ago no longer matter." All these things—a gesture at the window—have been meant to be seen in relief and perspective; nothing was wasted. A million years that he thought had rolled away unheeding into the abyss of Time were there, realizable in kind: a ship was sailing across the sky line, the ship of a million years. And there was a mist on the sea. The sun had gone, and the waters churned dolefully. Circling round, the ship of a million years came towards him. Terror, cold terror, seized him by the shoulders and shook him. And he awoke.

When Max emerged from his hotel he had discarded his town clothes and he wore, with his flannels, an eupeptic air, a jolly Harrovian blazer, tennis shoes, a Panama hat, and was strolling capaciously, swinging from the hips. Victor was waiting, had been waiting two hours now, but Max's face showed no sign of discomfiture. "If," he said, "the weather did not favour you and you had not a superb view of the sea, good air, plenty of space for exercising your legs, and plenty of time for reflection, I might have felt some compunction in being late for our meeting. Now then," he said, jauntily, "I am ready for anything!" He rejoiced to be back in the world of time, to look at the sea where different ships, flying the tricolour of this world, not

another, tugged at their moorings in the sea breeze. Life! Life! Everywhere life!

They passed an old man who read his newspaper in the fading sunlight of a public park; and that too struck them as beautiful and somehow significant: a threadbare form approaching its allotted span, weary of itself, yet curious about affairs in general and seeking trivial enlightenment. And that they, two poets, like Homer and Virgil, should at the setting of the sun go about the streets of a strange French port, unknown—that too was moving and mysterious.

Presently the two friends were dining on the little quay with the water lapping at their feet, the warships anchored in the distance, and the little sailing-boats and motor-boats alongside, with seamen standing athwart their swinging craft and clamouring for passengers to visit the grand fleet—*"Visite aux croiseurs!"*

Renunciation, Max thought, yes: if one is certain that there is no alternative save all-round ruin. But if one is not so certain? Ah, the tearing pain! He looked out longingly towards the darkening sea. The Mediterranean seemed to have fallen asleep. Green—emerald—lights of the lighthouses beckoned wistfully in the distance. He clenched his fists and groaned. "Unless I have that girl I shall be cheated out of my paradise."

"Yes," said Victor, "that's how renunciation strikes us. There are two ways of being disappointed: getting what you want, and not getting it. Of the two, the first, on the whole, is more redeeming. When you have got

what you want, you know the worst. You may feel ill-used; the romance of it, you note, has mysteriously evaporated. But it is one of many things you could wish for, and you set out on a new track. It is *not* getting what you want which is terrible. It is unhealthy. Life is a synonym for desire, and frustrated desire is a tumour which eats at your vitals, harbouring the germs of resentment, magnifying the loss till you succumb to the other extreme of delusion, that you have been cheated—or worse, have needlessly cheated yourself—of all that is worth while in life. Which is, I believe, what you have just said."

"That's all right, old man," said Max, "not so much intensity. Don't waste your emotion."

Victor sat back. "It is a curious phenomenon," he said in a tone of exaggerated detachment. "The reflection on the hollowness of desire fulfilled should be ample consolation, you would think, where and when desire is frustrated."

"You would think," said Max, quietly.

"But it is not the desire of desire that it should be so; and as in a mutiny it is the forces of destruction which take charge of the press, so here it is desire which takes charge of reflection."

"Excellent," said Max. And he brought down his fist with a thump. "Nevertheless, what am I to do?"

"The consequences of what you may do are so incalculable and the events that must occur apart and independently from what you do so unforeseen that

it hardly matters what you think of doing so long as you persuade yourself that there is something you can do about it and decide to do it. It is only when we realize that we cannot help ourselves that suffering is without an outlet, for it is we ourselves who have cut it off from every possible avenue of escape."

"You're enjoying yourself," Max remarked.

Even so, had Max not arrived to be consoled? And Victor felt like Freud advising, and at the same time experimenting, gaining knowledge for himself. He told Max so.

"I know. I know. . . ." Still, he believed our encounters here were not fortuitous: our souls sought after definite issues, rejecting what was indecisive. It may be strange. But life was strange. It was strange to come to earth. No less strange than entering another sphere, another plane of life. Uncanny. Strange to live oneself into new conditions, and to feel them intimate. Strange to be imprisoned in a body of bone and skin. But not strange to love. He scanned the sky line eagerly, and sighed. *"Ach, Isolde! Isolde! Wie schön bist du!"* Love was like a sun breaking through our tissues and warming our shivering limbs. He sat there, and his love folded its wings and kneeled by him, brooding.

The restaurants were putting out their lights. The little quay was abandoned, and the sea was dark as the grave.

They parted at the hotel door. Victor boarded the

last midnight tram which, all but empty, clanked noisily to Tamaris. Before the tram reached the terminus the conductor had already reversed the seats and doors for the backward journey, and at once they clanked back all but empty. . . . When he had clanked backwards and forwards a few thousand times the tram-driver would turn up his toes and it would be the end of his clanking. An oppression, like an airless cloud, descended on Victor. He knew without being told that the tram-driver and conductor's clanking journeys, from one terminus to another were so many silent sighs, uncounted pangs, in anticipation —of what? And outside hung the breathing, fragrant spring night, hung over the dark lazy bay. Why could Max not sail out and meet his Sheila and take her in his arms and tell her of his love, which might spread sail and carry this mortal craft across that distant sky line to the other side of Time.

CHAPTER TWO

Unless

III

WHEN Victor next morning called at the *Hôtel des Négociants et des Poètes* he was informed that Max had departed early in the morning for an unknown destination without leaving an address.

Max had indeed set out on foot across France to wear off the ill effects of a bad year. And presently he was back in England. It was a bright morning in August. He found himself with nothing to do. He would go and look up Victor Thurbon who, he heard, had left his little house near Toulon and was now back in London. A light breeze, a gentle sun, the prominence of men in grey hats and light-yellow gloves propelled him down Piccadilly. A reserved expensiveness about the shops, clubs, and hotels, as though even the blue friendliness above was an atmosphere *de luxe* for which these places paid in rent, so that unless you were a member or a client you were not entitled to partake

of it. Yet, after a long absence, there he was once more in London, and these lofty façades which had stood there many a good day, closed their eyes at night, blinked in the pale dawn, warmed up in the sun and languished through the afternoon, had a tale to tell were he prepared to listen. Unless he had the needed equanimity within him to address himself with such engaging friendliness to these insouciant buildings as to make them yield their secret to him; unless his soul could distil poetry out of their stone, it was really not a bit of use his walking now down Piccadilly. Unless he was in contact with the poetry of things he was paying dearly for the privilege of being alive. For then he ate without being filled. His whole existence, it occurred to him, hung on the word "unless."

Unless he *lived* he might as well be dead. At the corner of Albemarle Street they were repairing a drain. A dozen of them were repairing a drain, but their own souls were leaking. It was characteristic of the perversity which marked the human race since the Fall. What a fall, indeed! A fall on the head, since which cerebral accident man seemed to excel in putting the cart before the horse. Clearly, man ought first to have repaired his soul. With a full soul he could put up with a leaking drain. With a full soul he could forgive dilapidation; yes, see romance in it. But with a leaking soul poetry, life's purest water, must inevitably run aground.

Poetry was run aground everywhere. The pity of it!

Bad drainage. Wanted a soul-plumber. That was the practical need of the age. Drifting inadvertently into the park and carried by his legs towards the Marble Arch, he beheld already from a distance his grey-haired father who was holding a successful meeting. The old man, though fairly well-to-do, had given himself up with zest to open-air oratory. Max stood a little behind him, not wanting to be recognized. The old governor removed his hat and put it back again at intervals, either gesture, his son noticed, being used to emphasize a point, to stress a conviction. He spoke of how God had been good to him, how at times life had seemed hard, but how he always came to see afterwards that the trials and tribulations were meant as a lesson and a warning to him, that in truth they had been blessings in disguise. God had put him on his trial and, more with his own strength than by the help of God, he had won through; and now he walked in grace. That is why he came here. To tell them all how they too may be saved. He dealt efficiently with interlocutors, explaining that it was his meeting, not theirs, and if his listeners had the wish to hear themselves speak they had but to emulate him and mount a platform of their own. To a vociferously dissentient questioner he said, leaning forward on the stand, "You are a foolish old man and it is the devil who is speaking through you." There was an irritable, prickly readiness in his father to see harmonious design in everything and divine intelligence behind it, and his being so

mightily pleased with himself convinced his son that the directing motive of his father's oratory was the will to vent his egotism. And Max turned away with a sigh.

"Design in life?" he thought. "Yes. But if a bus runs into a lorry in Baker Street, the imaginative onlooker may discern unmistakable signs of law and design operative in what, after all, is an untoward accident. The death of Mr. X was caused by the—as it occurred, inevitable—impact of two vehicles at a point in time and space crucial for the said Mr. X. His death being the consequence of an appropriate wound cunningly adequate to cause his decease, with what consequent changes in the destinies of Mr. X's relatives who can tell, but doubtless far-reaching enough to admit a willing enquirer reading a design into it all. And the enquirer, given a mind cruder than the purely physical data governing the accident, might well see a divine intelligence behind it."

In such reflections Max whiled away his walk, till he found himself in Dean Street, whither Victor Thurbon of Tamaris had removed himself since his return to England.

IV

Max ran up a few rather sordid-looking steps, then rang the bell at a red glazed door. The door opened automatically and he went up another private little

flight of stairs and staggered, with a cheery ejaculation, "Well, here I am!" into Victor's presence.

Victor was overwhelmed with pleasure, but quickly controlled himself. "Allow me," he said, "to finish my instructions to my secretary," and turning to her: "About dinner. If the Duke of York can't come we had better ask Prince George. . . . Forgive me," he said, now greeting his guest more deliberately.

Max laughed. It was a good joke in just so far as both Max and Victor knew that it was poor, being offered, hypothetically as it were, at the expense of one who believed it possible to deceive another whom he thought capable of being taken in by it. "Excellent! Excellent!" Max grinned and looked across at Victor's red-haired secretary with interest.

Victor named them. "Mr. Fisher. Mrs. Blackadder."

Max noticed that she had a waft of red hair drooping forward across her forehead and that when she tossed her head back, as she did incessantly and rather beautifully, she revealed a delicately moulded forehead.

When the two friends were lunching on the roof garden of the Gargoyle Club across the street and Victor had been telling how he had advertised for a shorthand typist and selected from a queue of possible candidates the red-haired Mrs. Blackadder and how indispensable she had become to him, Max said, "Is she amiable?"

"'Amiable,' my dear Max, has to be qualified before

it is to mean anything. Because she may be amiable with me, it does not follow that she will not be difficult with you."

"Why?"

"Why! Look at your figure, man, at your red face; a combination designed to inspire virtue in any woman. A glance at you tightens the coils of refusal."

Max drew himself up. He would contest this. "You're damned offensive, Victor. My experience is that women like me."

"Some, no doubt. To others your advances, I opine, must seem obscene. You see, all notions of obscenity are founded on personal aversion. An unattractive woman who cherishes designs on me inspires in me a feeling of acute chastity, much to her contempt for my apparent innocence, ignorant as she must be of my impatience with the unyielding chastity of another, to me attractive, woman whose aversion to sex may, for all I know, be confined to myself. In other words, we call that obscene which does not happen to attract us. Should it appeal, we rightly call it passion. One person's obscenity is another's 'sex-appeal.' Were I a woman I would regard your advances as obscene. I think Mrs. Blackadder would agree with me."

"We'll see about that," Max thought. "We'll put it to the test. You, Victor," he said, aloud, "are not handsome, though you are elegant, I grant you that."

To this Victor said that he had noticed about his own face a resemblance to a dozen eminent men of

letters: something of Shakespeare and of H. G. Wells, of Chekhov, Shaw and Byron and Goethe and Oscar Wilde. Yes, and of Dickens and Hardy. And withal, of Mussolini and Napoleon I. So at least it seemed to him. "No doubt," retorted Max. To others, his *un*-likeness to these men was what made him peculiarly and individually Victor Thurbon.

Which was, at any rate, something distinct from being Max Fisher! No, Victor could not commend the hasty inference which some men were fond of drawing from one particular man's good luck with a particular young woman. In this instance it was cheapening Mrs. Blackadder, to say nothing of cheapening his own success with her. He remembered how she had come, among a queue of others, in answer to his advertisement and had stressed the fact of being a young widow of twenty-one. Hours were immaterial to her. She looked round dreamily. "How nice it is here." But he could not see more than her nose and somewhat protruding chin under her hat, and she left no very clear impression among a dozen other callers. Two days after, she had called again of her own accord. She had been passing and thought of asking whether he was "fixed." It was very hot. "Sit down," he said, and offered her a cigarette. "I am exhausted," she exclaimed with a sigh, and with feline grace tossed her hat off on to the sofa, revealing an intriguing waft of red hair drooping forward across her brow. She tossed it back, revealing an enchanting delicately

moulded forehead. With the slightest incline of the head the red waft flopped back across her forehead, which gave a never-ending opportunity to toss it back becomingly. It was then that Victor said that he wasn't really quite fixed up.

"I am a young widow of twenty-one," she reiterated.

He offered her a drink. Then, watching her graceful movements as she rose and walked across to the typewriter, he said she may as well consider herself engaged and start work tomorrow morning.

Next morning Victor left her to read his novel, and when he came back he found that she was bristling with criticism. "You don't seem to have ever loved profoundly," she said, and looked at him as if sizing him up, and then gave one of those languid feminine sighs and a lax twist of the body which was like an invitation.

Victor Thurbon had the same methods with all girls. He would bring them to his flat, show them his books, first editions, signed *éditions de luxe,* his photographs, press cuttings, and so on, treat them to a cocktail, and then begin.

Out he trotted the books.

When it was over, thoughts surged into his mind that he had not been employing his secretary to advantage. There was that novel, his publishers waiting, the world waiting, and he had only dictated eight words.

"Full stop," he said. "New paragraph."

This prompted her at once to reach for pencil and notebook. She was perfect that way; she knew when the fun stopped and work began; divined by her employer's expression when, to be more precise, fun ceased being fun and work beckoned like pleasure. And even in love she was like a secretary, lying in Victor's embrace with puckered brows as if taking notes of her employer's emotions. She was a perfect secretary. And when it was over, her cool slender fingers raced over the Underwood keyboard. Letters were folded and put into stamped envelopes. Manuscripts, shorthand notes were transcribed with accuracy and celerity. She was a perfect secretary.

How easy Victor's life was Max had seen for himself when he surprised him at work in his flat. Victor's main idea, he explained, was to avoid effort. In the morning he lay in bed and slept till it pleased his housekeeper to come and wake him, cook his breakfast, and begin her morning's work. She came when she felt like it; if she came late it gave Victor an opportunity to stay in bed with a clear conscience. If she failed to come, Victor failed to get up, that was all.

He spent all his natural energy in eliminating effort. Though only making ten pounds a week with his writing, he had chanced engaging Mrs. Blackadder as secretary, and though he paid her but little, he expected her to work if only to produce money enough to enable him to pay her salary. Why did Max think that this was meanness? Was it not rational to sup-

pose that one's expenditures should be in proportion to the effort one was ready to put up in earning it? A man who was reluctant to spend need not be a miser, for he may be spending most of his potential money on the thing he values most—leisure. He was extravagant in buying leisure. He spent most of his money in not earning it.

Perhaps he should not have expected his secretary to sympathize with his impulse to make money go as far as possible, for that did not mean that it would go her way. Moreover, Victor found that the very presence of a secretary in the room drained his energy, and he conceived the plan of working a dictaphone in conjunction with his secretary. The dictaphone had proved successful, but did not entirely obviate effort and difficulties of composition, for Victor found that inspired thoughts flocked to him in great droves while he was striding on the lawns of Regents Park, but they sat small and reluctant round the skirting of his room when he reclined on his sofa and courted the dictaphone. Much might still be invented to assist expression before he was quite equal to his potent self. He conceived in his mind a portable dictaphone operated by a small electric battery, carried in his waistcoat pocket and feeding a motor concealed in his hat, which would record his thoughts as he blew them into the speaking-tube cunningly disguised as a pipe between his teeth, at which he might puff intermittently without arousing undue suspicion—mumbling, grumbling,

to himself. What a novel he would write then! And articles! Articles! Prices soared in his mind. And all without effort!

But try as he would to reduce effort to a minimum, indeed to eliminate it, he discovered that it was now as much effort for him to talk as it had been to write. Eliminate talking? But if there were a dictaphone to record thinking it would become an effort to think. "I rebel," he said, "against effort." But it was an effort to rebel.

The greatest effort of all was to get up in the morning. To bath, to shave, to dress was hard labour. Lying in his bath, Victor would conceive of a machine which insinuated itself into your bed and on a steel arm lifted and lowered you into your bath, where it washed and shaved you, and thrust you expeditiously into your clothes. He would dream of such millennium till the water in the bath got cold. He would step out of it at last, conscious of the general unsatisfactoriness of human living.

Time was when, in the trenches, he had dreamed of a free and leisurely literary existence in just such a flat. It was like a beacon lightening to him through the bleak and meaningless routine of war. And now it was as though "all our yesterdays had lighted fools the way to dusty death."

Yet if, ten years ago in the trenches, or ten years hence, perhaps impoverished, he looked back on his present life when he could write an article in his own

time, on his own theme, whenever he felt inclined to exchange a little leisure for a little money, a pretty secretary taking his instructions in work or love, at one elbow, and a dictaphone at the other, what bliss this life which he despised would seem to him! So he thought. And he thought how stupid it was that Max, sitting opposite, did not know what he, Victor, thought: that for all the richness of emotion and experiences which was his he must seem to Max a thin and trivial individual.

V

After lunch, Max, stepping from the pavement with Victor, suddenly ran forward as if dodging the traffic, making Victor do the same, then laughing at him: for the street was empty.

That night Max, Victor, and Phyllis Blackadder dined together in Soho. Victor found that Max addressed himself more and more to her: "What do you think, Phyllis? Do you think there is anything in what I said, or do you think it is just——?" And Phyllis would come out with her conscious best, much to Victor's annoyance, who wanted to talk undisturbed. But Max would say: "I think you are right, Phyllis. Yes, that aspect has never occurred to me. What a marvellous little girl!" Victor had not admitted her to his literary councils as a full member. Max had done so

from the first day. Victor maintained a somewhat frigid, decorous attitude towards women with whom he had been intimate and invariably wrote to them as "Dear Mrs. So-and-so," and when by a look or a word they strove to remind him of the intimacies which had passed between them he maintained a puzzled look of non-comprehension. And he still called his secretary "Mrs. Blackadder." And only now that Max, from the first, called her Phyllis, did Victor cease to call her Mrs. Blackadder and emulated Max's example. At once she called him Victor, and even Vic on occasion, and to show Max her position she said to Victor, apropos of nothing, "You pig!" Victor raised his brows, then tried to break into the conversation. "Creative writing," he said, "is akin to——"

"Shut up, Victor," she said. "I can't hear what Max is saying."

Max looked at Victor as if he had forgotten that he was there, looked him over with interest: "You always wear blue suits?"

"Always."

"Never anything else?"

"Never."

"How many blue suits have you got?"

"One."

Back at Victor's flat, Max at once helped himself to refreshments, then made himself at home on one of Victor's voluptuous sofas which surrounded the room

as in a harem. He pushed a little cry of contentment as he stretched himself on the pillows, the while stroking back Phyllis's hair. What a lovely forehead the girl had! "Ah," he said, "I must be soothed, I am in need of affection. Talk to me gently, as if to an invalid. These dim lights have a calming effect on me. I have had a bad year, you know."

"Why reckon in years? Why not decades?" Victor asked.

"Why not, indeed? But I won't argue; I distrust my mind in most things. It is entitled to all the holiday it wants. 'Little mind, go and play.' Aren't I right, Phyllis?" He hugged her.

"Quite right, Max."

"What a clever little girl!"

"You're hard on the mind, Max," said Victor. "When our mind realizes that mind alone can know but little, the mind exults in knowing it. A noble and disinterested thing, the mind!"

"That's all right, old chap. You go on talking, exercising your mind; never mind us. We shan't interfere, shall we, darling?" He turned towards Phyllis, who said, "Yes," and the sofa springs sagged a little under the weight of their unanimous agreement.

"By God! you're a fine host, Victor," Max said, apologetically, after a while.

"I don't mind," said Victor. And secretly he thought: "Phyllis will take care of herself to the extent to which

I do mind; the rest will go towards balancing a bad year. All's well in the world."

Then it was late enough for them to go home. Max acted as though they three were henceforward inseparable; but Victor looked: "So nice to have seen you. Next time you are in town Phyllis and I——" It was therefore a surprise to Victor when Max, having apparently offered Phyllis to escort her home, suddenly hailed a taxi, opened the door for Phyllis, jumped in after her, slammed the door, and drove off.

Max came again and again, and when Victor complained that he interfered with their office hours, Max came every evening at six. Now they always greeted him in chorus with a ringing quotation from his book, and as the days passed, Max, hearing it, expecting to hear it, would fumble up the steps in a kind of half walk, half run, as if heavily doped, and joined them in a roar of exultation.

On Sundays Max took Phyllis to Streatham to visit her little boy, Ben, and he pushed the perambulator heftily while she, a soft look of motherhood in her eyes, walked by his side. Her husband had either died or was dead for her—Max was not sure which it was. She told him the story of her marriage and subsequent struggles to provide for her two little children, who lived in two different homes; of her quixotic employer and how she had put her heart into his business to increase his sales of vacuum cleaners, but how,

despite her efforts to popularize the new model, he finally had to close down. And the more Max listened, the more his heart went out in sympathy for her. "What pluck! What good sense! What *savoir faire!*" he thought. "Unless one day I win that girl I shall be cheated out of what is best and most generous in life."

CHAPTER THREE

The "Kennington Movement"

VI

A MONTH later Victor and Max decided to take a flat together and to invite Phyllis to share it. Phyllis bought *Dalton's Weekly* and found a furnished flat in Kennington which seemed to answer their requirements and resources. Her choice was determined by the information of a wireless on the premises, of a gramophone and a grand piano. They could dance—she excelled in it—and give cocktail parties, and Jim and Jack and Tom would come and it would be jolly and wonderful. Victor thought Kennington was socially uninviting. Max said they could overlook this, since two talented fellows like them could rely on giving any district they chose to reside in a *cachet* of its own. A literary movement would spring from their association, which they might well—to assist future historians—call the "Kennington Movement."

However, the flat in Kennington escaped their clutch,

and they were on the heels of another flat in West Kensington which made Victor come out with the suggestion that they now designate their literary movement the "Kensington" or more accurately the "West Kensington Movement." But Max pointed out that it might be rash and imperil their cause were they to change the name of a whole movement on account of the mere moving to a new address, which they might have to do again before long. So it came to pass that the name "Kennington Movement" was inscribed in the annals of literature yet to be achieved.

The West Kensington flat was secured through a firm of house agents who later proved themselves inefficient and charlatan. "I think you will find us aboveboard," the representative had said in response to a query.

There was no difficulty over the West Kensington flat. Max, Victor, and Phyllis arrived in a taxi, having made an appointment by telephone. A very nice young man in plus-fours, generously minded; his wife, more careful and stipulating extra for the use of the linen, received them. The young pair had been hanging out of the window, a little nervous lest the intending tenants were not going to turn up, after all, and, being sick of the sight of their flat, were anxious to let it. And they were young and pleasant and, as Victor thought, prepared to come down a little in price. But to any such overture that Victor might attempt Max

said, "No. I think this is reasonable. Let us leave it at that."

It was a "converted" self-contained flat in one of many dreary rows of stucco houses affecting a proud air of individuality and independence by the flaunting of a pillared portico and a wedding-cake ornamentation of the frontage—an end defeated by the repetition of the identical device all down the row. The flat, more accurately a *maisonette,* consisted of upper floor plus attic; and some rooms looked ominous with torn wall paper and soaked ceiling. "Oh, that's nothing," the smiling young landlord had said, showing them round the premises. "Last Christmas in the severe frost the pipe burst in the bathroom and flooded the floor, and some of the water came through the ceiling." This, Victor subsequently learnt, was a common experience. Most bath pipes in damp houses seemed to behave thus —if one listened to the landlord's version of it. It was agreed that Victor should have the quasi-private use of a bed-sitting-room on the top floor and Phyllis and Max each a bedroom up in the attic. Phyllis managed to make her barn exceedingly cosy and comfortable by taking most of the cushions and furniture from the sitting-room.

"The clever darling!" said Max. "How well she has arranged her nest!"

"I wish she'd leave the chairs and cushions in the sitting-room where they belong," said Victor.

And then she hung up her photographs: her

mother's, her children's, her husband's. It struck both Victor and Max as queer that, after all she had said of her husband, she should put up his photograph. But he was her husband: and to a woman there is something comforting, something warming, tender, respectable in having had a husband.

The moment Victor spied a piano he flung it open and essayed "Tristan and Isolde." The unexpected beauty of it seized Max by the throat; he sat down on the stairs and, closing his eyes, envisaged a mild summer night, a mediæval castle, and he and Sheila running into each other's arms. As a youth he had once seen a picture—reproduced on a post card—of a dream-like Isolde and a Byronic Tristan meeting on the stone terrace by moonlight; and below the magical score completing in the medium of sound what they, so favoured by the gods, must have felt, their hearts brimming over with bliss. And at that cadence his heart sagged with rapture.

"They say Tristan is one restless surge, a delirium of sensuality. But that cadence, that cadence! Intense, unappeasable longing for love. To hell with the critics! I remain a Wagner enthusiast." He rose and walked up to his room.

Early each morning Max ran round the streets in his shorts, to the no small astonishment of the men selling coal and the maids scrubbing the steps. Then, after a cold bath, he would join Phyllis and Victor at

breakfast, in the course of which a literary discussion would arise. It would arise fortuitously out of some passage in a book one or the other might be perusing over his bacon rapidly going cold.

"Ha!" Victor would exclaim. "Just fancy that. Listen to what Proust has to say. 'The profundity of a work is not inherent in the subject as some materialistically-spiritual novelists imagine who are unable to penetrate beneath a world of appearances and whose high-minded intentions, like those virtuous tirades one is accustomed to hear from people who are themselves incapable of the smallest effort of kindness, must not blind us to the truth that they have not the strength of spirit even to rid themselves of the banalities of a form acquired by imitation.'"

"Great! Great!" Max exclaimed, putting down his cup. "It is plain to me from that passage that Proust died prematurely. He was essentially of the Kennington Movement, one to lend it the lustre it lacks, as yet, alas! The pity of it!"

"Yes. But Proust is only half the sensation," Victor exclaimed, jumping to his feet and across to the bookshelf for a volume of the Goethe-Schiller correspondence. "Now what does Goethe say? Here it is: 'The art of literature requires from its practitioner a naïve, easy-going attitude confined to, and in love with, the things of this world, beneath which the Absolute lies concealed. Demands from on high destroy this naïve

and fecund state of mind and pass off for literature something which, once and for all, is not literature.'"

"Incredible!" said Max. "Goethe, too, a recruit to the Kennington Movement! What a man, to have said this a hundred years before us!"

Phyllis, who had once taken a passionate interest in vacuum cleaners, now thrilled with grave portentousness, as if they had been detectives on the track of a dangerous criminal, at the literary discoveries made by Victor and Max. It was sensational. It was exciting. She had quickly caught up with the main trends of their critical conversation and being given a passage to read of Max's or Victor's own composition she would come out with a comment like: "Not without merit." In the mornings, Max sat upstairs in his attic at his absurdly small business roll-up desk by the side of a draughty window and far from the fire and wrote his great book. They were like a happy family. Max would say about a new book: "It's a book we must read; don't let us miss it." Or, "We really must go to bed before midnight. It is most important for our health." And in the "we" was all the solicitude for the welfare of a self-contained trio in a self-contained *maisonette*.

VII

Max's tricks of suddenly running away without telling where or why—a habit acquired in evading an

exacting wife in the course of a long and unsuccessful married life—displayed themselves unaccountably and, as it seemed to his associates, unnecessarily, during their joint life in the self-contained *maisonette*. He insisted that he keep his hat and coat in his attic and he would at unforeseen intervals come down the stairs surreptitiously, hat and coat on, and vanish sneakingly out of the flat. And there was no noise, save the banging of the outer door when he was safely in the street. "Max!" Phyllis would cry. "Where are you off to?" He would look round, startled, and say, painfully: "That's all right, dear. I'll be back again presently."

Phyllis, despite the felicity of the triple *ménage*, adhered zealously to her free evenings and also vanished each Saturday and Sunday, and Max and Victor would hear in their sleep noises of the latch, the door gently pulled to: Phyllis had arrived. And by that time the window blinds already looked transparent. But she did not disdain a tea or a cocktail party with a literary bias and presided over the teapot, or to give a hint of her solid footing in the *ménage à trois* to her boy friends whom she had asked along with the literary guests, she would censure Victor or Max's social shortcomings with a "You pig!" On Sundays not infrequently it rained. Victor, a student of Goethe, once stumbled across a passage in a letter written on a journey in Switzerland: "This dreary morning I have resolved to stay in bed in order to converse with you." This sen-

tence, addressed to Schiller, impressed itself on Victor's mind, and when the sky was cloudy, the morning grey, he would repeat the lines to himself: *"An diesem trüben Morgen bleibe ich im Bette liegen um mich mit Ihnen zu unterhalten,"* and pulled the quilt over his ears. He remembered how Gogol sometimes feigned illness so as to stay away from the Ministry and occupy himself with literature. Gogol was tied to his stool in a chancery. Victor understood how soul-freeing a feeling it must have been to Gogol each time he stayed away. Victor was not tied to any stool. And just because getting up at his leisure to do his daily work could not thrill him continually, the staying in bed, by deepening his sense of leisure, fulfilled the same soul-liberating demand. And in the room upstairs, Max similarly entrenched himself against the empirical world. Each mind would dive into the past, resuscitate realities individually sustaining:

Was ich besitze, seh ich wie im Weiten,
Und was verschwand wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten.

Again, Goethe! Victor's dictaphone would stand at his bedside, for the most part unused, but ready to record any thought in an instant. In his attic bedroom Max, sitting up in bed—an attitude he called strengthening the resistance of the soul against the world—would look over an album of old photographs, and he would call out to Victor to come up and see him at the age

of twenty-two in a straw hat. Victor, in his dressing gown, stood at the dreary windowpane and both men watched the back yard of which Max's room had a commanding view, in the rain and the fog. "The fronts of these houses are like the icing of a wedding cake; the backs are sordidness beyond words!" Victor remarked. His childhood had been spent abroad in lucrative surroundings.

"Yes, that shirt there hanging in the rain doesn't add to one's sense of the amplitude of life," agreed Max.

"An English Sunday!"

"There is nothing like lying in bed except perhaps lying in one's coffin. Nature is cruel only to be kind. Life's so rotten we shouldn't mind dying."

"I don't mind."

"The curious thing is that life's so rotten even lying in bed."

"Perhaps getting up would be better."

"I don't believe it!" Max said, passionately, drawing the blanket over his head. "Oh—it's rotten!"

"There's a cat padding along the wall."

"Is she happy?" asked Max.

"Happy? No. Only composed."

"Only? Oh—oh—oh!"

Towards evening, hungry, they would come across each other rummaging for food in the larder. They would sit down to supper, branch out on to some literary discussion which would keep them occupied till

midnight, when suddenly Max would dress and quickly vanish down the staircase. "Where are you off to?" Victor would cry out from the landing.

"That's all right, old man," Max would mumble, and pull the latch behind him.

One evening as Victor and Phyllis returned from a dance they heard sobs upstairs, and found Max in tears. Life weighed heavily on him. Phyllis went up to his bedroom to console him and, coming down, said Max had had painful news from his wife. Then Max, soothed by feminine sympathy, came down and, beholding Phyllis in all her evening glory, "What a gown!" he said, gratefully, "and what a beauty you are." Then, to no one in particular, musingly: "She is young, she wants to amuse herself, wants to be taken out. Next time *I*'ll take you to a dance, won't I, Phyllis?"

"Of course."

"Dancing," said Victor, "is the nearest approach to intimacy between a man and woman possible in public. Already the next stage of necessity takes place in private."

"Ha! Ha! Not so bad," commented Max, and looked to Phyllis, who smiled the smile of one who is a fit companion to man and can appreciate suggestive jokes with masculine relish. He read, however, in her smile the possibility of carrying the intimacy initiated in dancing a step further on their reaching home. "And

so," he'd tell her as she threw off her flimsy things, "and so to bed!"

VIII

Victor noticed that Max lent more and more ear to what Phyllis had to say, and approved of it: "How wonderful! How true! How I agree with you." In all questions of domestic economy Victor found himself in the minority. To a plumber who asked one pound for a three minutes' job all Max had to say was, "Why, tell me, are all plumbers invariably comic characters in fiction?" The man replied: "I do my work conscientiously, sir."

"A pound!" said Victor.

"I think it's reasonable," said Max. "If you have a ten shilling note, here's another. That's reasonable, darling, isn't it?"

Phyllis thought it was not unreasonable and Victor was defeated by two to one.

But it was Victor who suggested that Phyllis might have her little girl with her in the self-contained *maisonette*. Max was not very keen on this. However, he thought, weighed, considered—and then said, "Yes, I think it is reasonable." Victor, having exhausted his generous feelings with the suggestion itself, never gave it another thought. It was Max who went with Phyllis to Selfridge's and bought a little bed for the child, sheets, blankets, pillows, etc., and on the evening

of their arrival from Birmingham, where the child had lived with her grandmother, Max went to the station to meet them, while Victor welcomed them on the steps. The very next morning they were aware of her. "Pam! Pam! Pam!" Victor heard Phyllis cry above him. And there was the sound of some one running incessantly, and the bathroom that morning was not available for a long time, and at breakfast they saw a small, curly-haired girl of two and a half with a chin as determined as her mother's and a character to match. And Pam touched everything she could get hold of and threw it on the floor. And the three adults suddenly found that their days, the sap of their power, were spent in preventing her. Max, beholding her with critical thoughtfulness, said: "The will to live. There it is, in all its native egotism!" All day long Pam ran from one room to another or fell down the stairs, and her mother, who was trying to cope with her secretarial duties on the typewriter, would have to jump up: "That child's fallen down again!" And Pam would not leave her mother alone, but insisted on sitting on her lap while Phyllis was typing, and, not content with that, interfered with the keys. Phyllis, who had a very authoritative manner with the maid, instructed her to keep Pam in the kitchen, where Pam clung to Kate's apron and prevented her from cooking the lunch. And Pam, though very small, had an uncanny knack of turning door handles. "Kate!" Phyllis would shout

again and again, "take her. Tell Kate to keep you out," she impressed on Pam.

"Kate, keep me out," they heard Pam pipe in the kitchen.

Kate gave notice.

Kate having gone, Phyllis took temporary charge of the kitchen and did the cooking, while Pam with shrieks of entreaty tried to prevent her and clung to her mother's legs, who, thus handicapped, could scarcely move from the grate to the larder. Max, ever sympathetic, would take Pam upstairs to his room and keep her locked between his knees while writing his book, or try to interest her in a peaceful game on the floor. Nothing would pacify her short of throwing everything on the floor.

Victor, appealed to by her mother, proffered advice. Her little brother had better be sent for. Children playing together were models of composure. Max again thought, weighed, considered—and said he thought it reasonable. Phyllis this time went to Streatham and returned with a chubby, red-cheeked, one-year-old with wistful eyes under long lashes, who smiled and smiled all the time and was chastised by Pam till, irritated out of his natural complacency, he pushed piercing cries, loud and sustained; one might almost think he was using a trumpet: incredible volume for one so small! Instead of playing with each other as Victor had meant them to do, they now both clung to their mother's skirt and the thought of cooking at home had to be

abandoned. The three of them, trailing two howling children clad in wool, could be seen trudging to a local restaurant for their midday meal. And Victor, to whose fine sensibility Phyllis's children owed the freedom of the flat, agreed with Maurois that *"la société des enfants est charmante mais fatigante."*

IX

Max worked like a nigger and a father to lift the pressure of life from Phyllis's shoulders. Victor exhausted his goodness in friendly and well-meant advice. The burden of executive responsibility brought Phyllis and Max together, while Victor's advice was less and less availed of, so that while the other two were away on some errand, Victor was sensible of being left alone with his advice; and out of a union of oneself and one's counsel is begot the child grievance. One night when Victor had waylaid Phyllis coming out of her bath, and was cajoling her on the landing, she whispered to him that Max was terribly jealous. And indeed, while they stood there and whispered there came Max's voice from the landing above, an imperious, "Phyllis!" This, next day, led Victor to enquire during dinner as to what the conspiracy might be, and Max, tightening his lips into a thin line, which with him signified displeasure, replied that there was no conspiracy, but Phyllis must not be intimidated. Asked by Victor what intimidation he referred to, Max said he would not

argue. He never, he said, argued. A little later, having again accused Victor: "I won't discuss this. I don't believe in discussion." And every time he drew in his lips and his face assumed a strange, rigid, glassy expression. But Victor, unnerved, ferreted Max out of his passive retreat, and Max, challenged to do so, accused Victor of having taken advantage of the starvation of Phyllis to compel her to submit to him.

"Oh yes, of course! Compelled her under torture." Suddenly Victor felt he could not counter such a mass of disconnected and unfounded accusation. He would not have known where to begin, and Max having said his say would not, he said, argue about it. What, he asked, of Max's own advances to Phyllis (so much more repellent to her, as it seemed to him)? That was different, said Max, for he loved her. "That may be," Victor replied, "and must be regarded as an extenuating circumstance to you, but hardly to her."

"She loves me, too," said Max.

"I don't believe it!" Victor cried, hotly. He felt that Max was forcing her hand. And what was more, when Phyllis hastened to seal Max's hasty confession with, "We love each other," he felt she was forcing Max's hand. It was a double trick sprung upon him. "It's a lie! A lie! A damned lie!" Victor exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "A conspiracy to leave me in the cold." He had liked Max more than any other man he had met, and if he had affected, the first day of Max's arrival, to invite Max to share Phyllis's kisses, it was hospitality

of the purest water and Max should have been the last to complain. But how could he explain this to Phyllis? "Hospitality!" she said fuming. *"Your* hospitality? How is it yours to dispose of, I'd like to know!"

Again he felt he could not counter such a mass of entangled but unfounded accusation, and, anyhow, his advances, however odious, according to Max, compared well with Max's own—at least so he thought. That Max should have brought against him what in his own eyes, if not in those of Phyllis's, should have been self-sacrificing hospitality—that he should have brought this now to wrench her from him was surely treachery of a rare kind. It seemed to him that never had he loved more purely, nor that, since Cæsar's fate, had friendship been rewarded by so foul a stab in the back. He went out into the drizzling streets and wept and wept.

Whereas Max paced his floor in the attic, arranging and allaying a series of disturbing thoughts in some such order: As Cæsar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him; but, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There are tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honour for his valour; and death for his ambition.

The evening did not see their passions through. Next morning the wrangling continued. "I would say nothing if he loved you," Max argued, loudly, "but he's forcing you." Phyllis, who had always got the better

of men—and even of women—did not, as it seemed to Max, with fine magnanimity, press the accusation.

"Oh, what a lie! What a lie! What a lie!" Victor wailed. He stood leaning against the mantelpiece, when the hem of his dressing gown caught fire.

"You're burning!" Phyllis exclaimed.

"Don't care," he said, tearfully.

They spoke at the top of their voices, and Pam, either distressed by the tone of their wrangling or more probably out of sheer perversity, feeling that no one could attend to her just now, began howling and whimpering. "Pam, stop it at once!" Phyllis said, irritably.

What added to the confusion was that on the morning they had broken off negotiations the new cook arrived, a large, homely, but fierce-eyed woman in a modish overcoat and a bosom that was, to say the least of it, ample, and flaunting her virtue and integrity in everybody's face. They had no time to talk to her, nor could she gather which of the warring factions had conquered the territory and was to be obeyed and recognized by her. All seemed equally irresponsible. They gathered her name was Mrs. Carr, and she took charge of Pam and Ben and entrenched herself in the kitchen.

It was a time for swift decision. Warned by the fate of Matthew Arnold, Max, whenever the choice of renunciation or self-abandonment presented itself, invariably alighted on the last. Shakespeare, too, he recalled, unlike Goethe, who on the contrary backed at

the last moment out of every emotional entanglement, dashed heedlessly into passion and left consequences to take charge of themselves. "Unless," he thought, "I get that girl I shall be cheated out of my paradise."

"Well," said Victor, turning round to Phyllis from the mantelshelf which he was facing to hide his emotion, "are you prepared to go on being my secretary?"

"She's not," said Max. "Come, darling," he said, opening the door for her.

She hesitated a moment, then went without a word.

Victor stood very still, then heard how Max banged the outer door behind him. Mrs. Carr came in, cap and apron on, and asked him what he wished for lunch. Pam and Ben, napkined, were sitting side by side at the dining-room table, swinging their legs, eating nicely and peacefully.

X

Max returned a week hence, and came in late and vanished early each morning, and the two men avoided meeting on the stairs. But Phyllis did not come back. When Victor chanced to play "Tristan and Isolde," Max, coming out of his room, hat and coat on, lingered in the kitchen, stood by the window with closed eyes till the music was over, then vanished for the day. The *ménage à trois* had contracted to that of one man who lived with two children and a cook. He was suddenly aware of being a man with a family—two infants who called incessantly: "Uncle Victor! Look! Look!" and

brought him things, for the most part his own, to examine, which they left on the floor or took away to the kitchen, and who desired to be lifted to the window to see a big dog in the street. After lunch he took them for walks. Ben was drowned in white wool and only his cheeks glowed purple under sad eyes with long lashes, and Pam, a size bigger, strutted along through pools on the pavement in her miniature Russian boots. And if he took hold of their hands they cried bitterly, and if he left them alone they made at once for the traffic. For the rest, Pam could stand on her head and do extraordinary things with her legs. "The circus," Victor thought. "Must keep that in mind for her future."

One morning Mrs. Carr respectfully tendered notice, informing him that Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Blackadder, who were going abroad (and which was none of her business, she added, though of course she could not help seeing through things, if he knew what she meant, but people were as nature had made them and she was not called upon to pass any comments)—in a word, Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Blackadder had asked her to take charge of the children at thirty shillings a week, and she would be leaving him at the end of the week, to be sure, on Christmas Eve, and would take them to her own home in Hammersmith, which arrangement suited her better, as she would be able at the same time to look after Mr. Carr, who was getting on but was fond of children, who, she hoped, would brighten him

up. Of course, she realized she was taking a risk, as Mr. Fisher appeared to be low in funds, for he had instructed her to sell his old clothes. And indeed it appeared that Max, who had thought one pound a reasonable price for three minutes' plumbing, now displayed a wiry pertinacity, a veritable deviltry, in sticking out for sixpence in respect of an old flannel shirt, clinging tooth and nail to a *demodé* waistcoat. "Well, sir, he thinks he'll get five bob for his old trousers. But really, if you ask me, they're quite shrunk and narrow at the bottom. Any of these young chaps would rather have a fashionable cut of cheap stuff than Mr. Fisher's castoffs, though it's not for me to say so."

A last question: did Mr. Thurbon want her to buy in some food before she left him, to last over Christmas, as the shops would be closed and he was apparently not going anywhere?

"Yes; six eggs."

"Will that be enough?"

Yes, six eggs seemed enough to him, because he hated them. Yes, and hated Max with his old clothes and Phyllis, and Mrs. Carr, for leaving him just before Christmas when all he could cook was an egg. He would starve; and it would serve them right!

On Christmas Eve Mrs. Carr took elaborate leave of him, assuring him again and again (they had drunk a glass of port in farewell) that the six eggs were in the larder and that she had left the flat as tidy and self-contained as humanly possible considering the diffi-

cult time she had had, what with the children and not properly knowing who was who in the flat, who was staying and who was going, from one day to another —no offence meant to him. And though she preferred to say nothing, and had held her tongue as was seemly in her position, he must not think she did not feel for him being left like this in the lurch by Mrs. Blackadder. She understood. But never mind! There was better fish in the ocean than ever came out of it.

"Quite. But it is in the ocean."

Then there was the sound of the door drawn to on the latch. Victor stood at the window. A very large and ample woman, she went down the road; dusk was falling and the winter streets looked thoughtful and sad, and on each side of her trotted two incredibly small forms, one in Russian boots, the other hidden in wool to the heels. They trotted away out of sight to their new life, their new home with Mr. and Mrs. Carr. What awaited them in the future? What pain or fortune was to be theirs?

XI

When Victor awoke it was Christmas morning. He lay in bed, ill, or wanting to be ill. He hoped he had some heart trouble that the two of them had caused by their heartless behaviour. He hoped he would die and that they would rue it for ever and ever. He was musing thus when he heard heavy steps at the door

and Max barging clumsily into the room. They had not spoken to each other since the day of the quarrel. All communications of a business nature between them had been confined to writing little slips to each other in cold, formal fashion. It had been decided by this means that, in consideration of Max's continued contribution of his share of the rent for the self-contained *maisonette,* Victor agreed that Max should occupy his little villa in Tamaris. Victor had heard that Max had recently sent his bankers a press cutting, containing a favourable review of his last book, on the strength of which he solicited an overdraft. The bank's reply had been cordial in respect of the review, negative in respect of the overdraft. Victor agreed to let Max and Phyllis occupy his disused house in the south of France; and suggested to Max that on arrival he should ask for Mme. Pétain and engage as a daily char either Pauline or Elise. But such amiability did not entitle Max to barge in on his privacy bear-like fashion. He now appeared to Victor a curiously clumsy fellow—not on the best terms with crockery. A man who might sit down on a gramophone record and say jovially: "Sorry, old man. Nothing lasts for ever," and reading discomfiture on Victor's face, in augmented tones of irritation: "I said: *sorry*. I can't go on saying it." (As though, Victor thought, the main thing about it all was his sorrow and Max was vexed with him, Victor, for his failure to sympathize with him in his sorrow.) Irritated, Max would lean back with a jerk and break the back of the

chair. "By Jove!" with a laugh, "I *am* sorry this time! But your things *are* brittle, there's no doubt about it. However, enough of this! Let's talk of other things." A difficult man to keep house with.

Now standing in front of Victor, Max cleared his throat. "I don't want," said he, "to break the silence. But I will cook your breakfast for you. I've had mine, and there are three eggs left for you in the larder." He was leaving and it was Christmas Day, a day of peace and good will among men.

Victor could not reply. He had it not in him to reply. He was capable of generous attitudes on fitting occasions, but, at the moment, in his present mood, a peace offering of his own eggs— No! as well might Lear, about to brave the storm, accept from his daughter's hands the loan of a mackintosh. He accordingly remained in a lying position in bed, since, unlike Count Rantzau at Versailles, he could not emphasize his protest by remaining seated. Max waited a little, coughed, then went, an ill-used man.

Then Victor heard voices of men and a noise. Max had apparently hired a few men out of the street to carry down his boxes. Then Victor heard the men demur at the remuneration. "We are unemployed, sir," they said.

"I, too, am unemployed," said Max.

Then the taxi rattled and drove away.

It was that cold winter everybody remembers and which was described by the newspapers as the coldest

Christmas in the memory of quite old people, and as the same was said of the winter before and the winter to follow, one cannot be sure whether it is their memory or their resistance to cold which had played truant with them. Victor, in an overcoat and galoshes, sat in the middle of the room, whence he could reach most things without getting up, and sang, "Glory, glory, hallelujah . . . and we'll go marching on."

XII

After the holidays Victor engaged a new charwoman, who sneaked about the empty *maisonette* and asked for every bit of rubbish she could get hold of to take away to her children—Pam and Ben's broken toys, bits of wood, pieces of paper. A month or so later Victor had an unexpected visitor.

"A lady with children wishes to see you," said the charwoman.

"What sort of a lady?"

"A very stout lady with children."

"Show them into the dining-room."

And there was Mrs. Carr with Pam and Ben, and a bouquet of spring flowers. "Excuse my receiving you like this in my dressing gown," said Victor.

"That's all right, sir. I've seen you more in your dressing gown than in any other dress."

"True," Victor said, a little wistfully. "True."

There was a short pause. She wanted, Mrs. Carr said,

to give Mr. Thurbon the opportunity of seeing the children before Mrs. Blackadder's mother took them away to the south of France to rejoin Mr. Fisher and their mother who, according to post cards received, were thriving in the sun and the sea breeze.

"That's very nice of you." He touched the children under the chin, smelt the flowers with an affectation of pleasure, sat with the old cook discoursing amiably on various topics of the day, drumming the while with his fingers on the table lid, while her look grew more sombre. "Well," he said, rising, "it was nice of you, Mrs. Carr, to come and bring the children to see me. I am fond of them."

"Mr. Thurbon," she said, "could you lend me a pound till the end of the month? I am very hard up for money and my husband is still out of work."

He hated lending money, hated the people who borrowed facilely and forgot about it, so that when, being in as dire need of it as themselves, you ventured to ask them, they gave you a look of pained surprise (which you had concealed when they borrowed from you). "Certainly, certainly," he said, fiddling with his pocketbook. "Curse the woman," he thought. "Curse her, curse her, oh, curse her!"

A few days later the sink in the kitchen got clogged, and the plumber was sent for. He came with a bag out of which he produced a huge sucking instrument, gave one vast squeeze, after which the waste flushed away rapidly; then replaced the instrument in his bag

and was gone, the transaction occupying exactly two minutes. Encouraged, however, by his previous remuneration, he sent in his account:

"To force and unstopping waste of sink and thoroughly clean out same and flush through and leave in order.

£1: 0: 0:"

Some weeks later another lady was announced, who was determined at all cost to obtain Mr. Fisher's address abroad. "His wife!" Victor thought. There had been rumours recently that Max was arranging to be divorced by his wife, to enable him to marry Phyllis. Victor braced himself for an interview with a determined and rebellious lady who apparently would not be put off by his charwoman and insisted on seeing him face to face, to wheedle out of him the address of her prodigal spouse. Duly shown in and received by him with a courteous sympathy due to her tragic position, he asked her to be seated, and then looked at her with enquiring charm: "You wish ——?"

"I am," she said, "a representative of Whiteley's laundry and have come to collect the amount owing to us by Mr. Fisher."

"A large amount?"

"Two-and-six."

This was his last link with the abortive attempt to set up house with Max Fisher. "The Kennington Movement . . ." he thought. "The Kennington Movement!"

He imagined how future examiners, anxious to devise a snag for unwary undergraduates, might pose the question in a paper: "Describe briefly the cause and effect of the Kennington Movement." And they would be hard put to it to describe it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Du Coté de chez Horse

XIII

ON CHRISTMAS EVE Max paid a visit to Jaeger's in Oxford Street to equip himself for the Riviera winter with two stout pairs of pants. A quick, eager man took down his order, took his money, handed him a receipt, and Max left the airy, commodious premises, Phyllis on his arm, three minutes after having entered the shop. In the street he addressed her. "Say what you like, there is a good deal to be said in favour of capitalist civilization. In a socialist community, if you wanted two pairs of pants, you would first have to fill out a requisition form, stating the sad condition of your old pants, countersigned by the foreman of your works, who certifies that he has acquainted himself with the state of your present two pairs and believes your application for two new ones to be bona fide, inasmuch as they are intended for personal use and not for sale. Then you wait six months till the cold weather is over,

to receive, at the crest of summer, *one* worn pair of pants requisitioned by the Government from the wardrobe of some unhappy nobleman and turned over to yourself, in consideration of services rendered by you to the State. No, I'm all for capitalism."

Phyllis agreed enthusiastically. But if Max desired to see capitalism at its best he should come with her to Worth's.

Which indeed he did, fired by her quick response to his mood, and whither she led him with something of the disinterested enthusiasm of a lover of art who conveys his friends to a historical museum to solicit their appreciation of a picture so as to heighten his own pleasure by the absorption of their eager response. The museum was full of feminine garments. Art for art's sake, he realized before long, finds its deepest expression in acquisition. Max hinted that Paris was the natural centre of feminine shopping. Phyllis emboldened him to be patriotic. Already this side of the Channel Max found that Phyllis, so amiable, so sensible in other respects, was, like most girls, still a savage and regarded heavy expenditure on her behalf as a sign of her worth and felt herself slighted by a cavalier's attempts at economy. A cavalier, he was nervous lest he be thought not a cavalier. And when they left Worth's, Max thought that there was something to be said in favour of a socialist order of society where no new garment is issued till proof has come forth that full and ample use has been made of the old one. He

had, it was true, obtained an overdraft at the bank, but his credit, like Einstein's universe, if boundless, was not infinite. Max felt a little nervous, a little wistful at the undertaking of launching abroad with this young sylph of a woman whose red-haired locks had ensnared him, and for whose future, it would seem, he was now responsible. Why must he, with nerves and credit so frail, pledge his strength to save damsels in distress?

And in the inhuman scramble at Victoria, and through the evening journey to Dover, which lent the flight a kind of sundown gravity accentuated by the darkening landscape, tunnels, artificial light; and going down those stairs, smelling the smell of the saloon; and, again, as they moved away and heard the sea as slowly it turned on the beach, Max felt a little sad, a little tragic and heroic, as though, turning round to England which rolled its angry surges between its cliffs and the small craft which carried him away to a more gracious land, he might reproach the unseen millions of that island: "You have willed it. Byron. Shelley . . . Here goes yet another. . . ."

In Paris they sat in an incredibly crowded restaurant outside the gare du Nord, and a look in the waiter's eye implying impatience with their unfamiliarity with the items on the menu convinced them that Paris, too, was not their goal; that they must travel south, to the sea and the sun, where in the bosom of a sun-warmed people they might hope to find a harbour from ill fate.

When the train was approaching Toulon, Max leaned out of the window and said: "Here, scarcely six months ago, I first met old Victor—though the weather then was different." It was raining when they alighted and on the steamer, traversing the wide "Rade" to Tamaris, Max stood gazing ahead with the collar of his mackintosh turned up, and Phyllis sat on a bench on deck, staring at the ghostly warships flying the tricolour, in a kind of stupor, concentrated deep in herself, and raindrops on her brows.

"There is the house," he pointed. The house, Phyllis thought, was rather like a wet hen on a perch, its head buried in its breast. Forlorn and miserable and absurd. "Cheer up," said Max. "Wait till the sun comes out. The Riviera is not itself without the sun." And he whistled a gay tune.

When, trailing their bags and suitcases, they turned into the little lane where stood the house, they passed a little boy who must have spied them as they came up the road. He vanished in the bushes.

The house was, indeed, very wet. It seemed quite soaked from the outside. What it was like inside they could not guess, for it was locked and they were at a loss to know where they might get the keys. "But didn't you ask Victor? Max, you really are the limit!" Phyllis protested.

She forgot, he told her, that he and Victor were not on speaking terms. Such conversation as occurred

between them was necessarily concise and much of the required information had perforce to be economized.

There were extensive grounds descending to the sea in terraces, but they were very wet. Indeed, so wet that if one ventured beyond the gravel path which led up to the gate, one sank ankle deep in the red soil of southern France.

Below, a young farmhand clung to the fence adjoining the narrow railway track down which people threw their empty tins and other rubbish. But every couple of hours in twenty-four, a tiny teakettle of a locomotive puffed along, trailing in its wake a string of undersized coaches, giving a piercing whistle each time it passed the house at the bend, lurching perilously over the curve on its way to Hyères.

Perhaps that young farmhand could enlighten them as to where they might hope to obtain the keys of their house. They cautiously climbed down the muddy slope to speak to him. The young man watched the train straighten itself out in the distance and vanish out of sight and hearing, but still clung to the fence and looked at the new arrivals with a heavy, vacant, pre-natal kind of look. He answered questions not unwillingly, but still looking at them vacantly and heavily. He revealed with a degree of pride that he was his own master, but engaged by Captain Bernard, who was absent, to keep an eye on his property. They explained who they were: the sub-tenants who had taken over the little house from Monsieur Thurbon,

who was a tenant of Captain Bernard's. To all such comprehensive statements the young farmhand said, "I understand." And it seemed appropriate that he should say it, since he did so always with an effort. The keys? Yes, he knew who had the keys. Mme. Pétain, who stored Monsieur Thurbon's trap, had them.

"And what is your name?" they enquired.

"Monsieur Emile," answered the farmhand. And he got off the fence. He would go and tell Mme. Pétain to bring the keys at once. He himself still looked after Zaza, Monsieur Thurbon's horse, but the gate wasn't wide enough to let the trap pass, so Mme. Pétain across the road stored the trap.

While Emile went to fetch Mme. Pétain, Phyllis and Max went down to the stable and examined Zaza, a somewhat vicious-looking bay horse, stroked his warm nose, gave him sugar, and behaved as one should behave to a horse.

Mme. Pétain, bringing in her wake a pale young maiden suffering from toothache who she thought might char for them, explained that she knew without Emile's telling that *messieursdames* had arrived. Her little boy, Loulou, had seen them. But she was putting on a new dress to welcome them in, hence the delay.—Oh, quite! The new arrivals looked propitiatingly from the one to the other. Monsieur Emile had kindly told them that Mme. Pétain would make things easy for them, and here she was—how thoughtful of her—at hand with a daily help!

"'Monsieur' Emile, indeed! the silly ass!" she exclaimed. "He thinks himself somebody. *La! la!*" She was not flattering on the subject of Emile. He had had a dreadful drunkard of a father, or else his mother must have dropped him on the head soon after he was born; anyhow, the lad was almost a village idiot. He had been half adopted, half employed by Mme. Égut, across the river, and imagined himself a gentleman. "Monsieur" Emile indeed!

Meanwhile, Emile repaired the pump, put the rusty chain back on the wheel in the well, and generally proved a friend in need. Emile explained which land was the Captain's and which the tenant's: the fig trees, the almond trees down at the fence, were Max's; the pine garden was the Captain's, but could be used by them when desired. The Captain, when he did not drink, was nice enough, Emile opined, though he was apt to be in arrears with the wages and owed Emile four months' pay.

Mme. Pétain said the Captain was a ferocious wild boar when in his cups, and had thrown his first lady-love into the sea. It was dangerous to cross his mood. But there were days when he was amiable; in fact sweetish in his gallantry and would say to her: "Madame Pétain, do what you like with my property. Take what you like. Help yourself. What is mine is yours." But he was not quite a gentleman. Mme. Pétain narrowed her shrewd brown eyes and smiled an oblique smile which meant that they understood each

other; that was it, promoted from the ranks! Yes. Otherwise, a peasant like herself, that's all. Of course, he looked imposing enough in his blue uniform, but she did not see why he should lord it over her, since any day she was as good as he. "*'Monsieur le capitaine.' La! la!* . . ."

The young maiden with the toothache took off her hat and rolled up her sleeves and went down to the well with a bucket and brought it back, slopping the water all over the steps. It was raining: her thin shoes sank in the soaking ground. They felt sorry for her and Max volunteered to take her at once to a dentist. She said she would rather die.

Mme. Pétain assisted with the windows, but presently had enough of it and went home. Phyllis and Max unlocked the rooms and went upstairs into the main long drawing-room. And sat down. Then they looked at each other and smiled. Happen what might, they must sit a little longer. This was the first real halt since their flight. But knowing that they could sit as long as they liked, curiosity at once lifted them to their feet. They must reconnoitre a bit. The draught was awful: the wind whizzed round and round the house. But what a view! "Look," Max pointed eagerly. "Now you can already see the lights—emerald, beloved by mariners. Paul Morand speaks of them somewhere. Let me see if I can find the book. I remember Victor reading me the passage when I first came to see him here."

"When we've unpacked, Max, and had something to eat," Phyllis demurred.

But he was already rummaging among the dusty shelves. "Here it is, dear. It adds charm to the place. Morand, you see, is returning home from his Eastern tour, which forms the subject of the book, and from the bridge the first lighthouse of France, Portcros, then two others—Saint-Mandrier (which hides Toulon, that is ourselves and our green lights) and Cassis, are announced. He goes on to describe——"

"Won't that do for later, Max? I am a little tired."

"So am I. But I do try to take an interest in the place I am going to live in," he said, stiffening.

"But what is the hurry?"

"W-w-well," Max's lips quivered, "I don't want to hurry you. Personally, I am only too grateful if anything like that is pointed out to me."

They could hear the maiden washing the tiles on the steps. She was delicate, aristocratic-looking, and washed the tiles ineffectively with her thin hands red with the cold. Mme. Pétain had already thrown out hints of the amorous proclivities of the girl's mother. There had been a bird of passage . . . of distinguished plumage. Been and gone; but the child remained, was now seventeen. Phyllis paid her in the evening. She would come again tomorrow.

"Oh, by the way, what is your name?"

"Pauline. *Bonsoir, messieursdames.*" And she vanished in the wet and the dark.

Night. Pines swaying in the wind. The swelling sea. And in the morning the rain had stopped and there was the sun over a wintry landscape.

XIV

Lots of *épiceries* about. And a *brasserie*. Also a *patisserie* across the road. Given money they needn't starve, it was true. But how annoying to be recognized at sight as English, and to have no money. Max explained, and explained again, to Mme. Pétain, who was voluble in cataloguing the places of amusement they might visit, that they had no money. Mme. Pétain narrowed her shrewd brown eyes as she looked suspiciously into Max's own. Was he having a game with her? Did he see any green in her eye? What about the rate of exchange? The rate of exchange, said Max, was immaterial to a man like himself, who had nothing to exchange. Mme. Pétain thought this *drôle*. An Englishman without money! A contradiction in terms!

To make money Max must first settle down to work. Before Max could settle down to work something had to be done to the house to make it fit for working in. The whole place needed whitewashing. Max whitewashed the ceiling, but when he had done the job it rather looked as though it was the floor he had had in mind and that in the eagerness of his performance some of it had inadvertently got on to the ceiling. The

day was spent in petty worries inseparable from installation in a new place. By night Max tried to write his novel in the damp ground-floor cubicle which was his study, by the side of a new petrol stove. There was an unholy silence in the room, which had once been a pigsty and later an ice-cellar, and Max had a feeling that presently the window shutters would fling open and a burglar step into the cubicle. There was no sound but that of Max's fountain pen and now and then the creaking of Phyllis's bed above him, who turned and tossed upstairs because she was afraid to sleep alone. Her thoughts involuntarily turned to Max, whose ground-floor cubicle was connected with the floor above only by an outdoor stairway. Max's mind, relieved of visions of physical love, swayed in a medium where Phyllis had no place. The productive spell, however, was quickly broken. A stray thought, the sight of a book, the memory of an unanswered letter, sufficed to throw him off his balance. Gratefully he would clutch at the first excuse to postpone the work which he knew was the one thing in life that could have made him happy. And there already he was reading Proust, and not enjoying him because angry with himself for his weakness. Yet there it was: this curious blight on all creative activity: a tendency to dream rather than do. Though he felt it was his only means of being equal to himself, he clutched at every irrelevent task but his own, which was to decipher the book of illusion. "Every outward event," Max read in Proust,

"whether the Dreyfus Case or the War, has furnished writers with an excuse for not deciphering that book; they had wished to ensure the triumph of right, to refashion the moral unity of the nation, and had no time to think of literature. But these were nothing but excuses, for they had no genius, or not enough of it, that is to say, no instinct. For it is instinct which dictates the task, while the intelligence supplies the pretext for eluding it. But no excuse avails in art; good intentions count for nothing. At all times the artist must obey his instinct; which explains why art is of all things the most real, the most austere school of life, and the true Last Judgment." Proust was right. But Max reading Proust was clutching at an excuse to postpone his real work. And by now he was too tired to continue his own writing. Ah, life! Life!

There was a deep universal reason why he could not content himself with the present. By an implacable spiritual law, his imagination—which was the receptive faculty—could only focus that which was absent. It was as if Nature, in perfectly good faith, had meant to provide the race with rosy spectacles but by an oversight had sent us, readers of the book of life, a pair of field glasses. The far-away things accordingly seemed clear in focus, but the book of life before him so blurred as to be well-nigh illegible. And his London life with Victor, stripped of the irritations of the moment, already seemed to him not without poetry,

compared with the chill discomforts of the Côte d'Azur.

It was, speaking broadly, the lack of money which prevented Max from digging permanently into the present. A present to be dug into must be worth it. Money to a writer was, on the face of it, dependent on a book: books needed writing. Max could not write adequately unless electric light and a real stove were installed in his cubicle, and this, Emile said, was a matter for the proprietor, the Captain. The Captain had recently got married and had neglected his periodic visits. They must, however, wait for him, the owner of the property, whose arrival cannot now be long delayed. Thus life was pending on the Captain, who was holding up all that was worth while for Max, eating away his days.

But life, however stationary it may seem, is movement. A vehicle moves forward, the traffic hums, and the hold-up is again harmoniously resolved.

The honeymoon couple, word passed one morning, had arrived in the night. The bridegroom, it was said, was anxious to display his property to his bride to the best advantage, for he was eager to utilize her dowry on improving it. Emile spoke in hushed tones indicative of great schemes afloat, great projects launched beyond the ken of a small sub-tenant as M. Fishaire and his lady must appear in the eyes of so mighty a being as the Captain who now reposed behind the closed shutters. Emile was frightened of making a

noise. The Captain and Madame were sleeping, he explained. He dare not disturb them. They would know when the Captain awoke because they would then hear the gramophone. And, quite true, presently the shutters opened and strains of "Valencia" wafted into the garden.

Later they saw him. A great burly figure, he strode quickly and capaciously between the flower beds followed by Emile whom he addressed as *"tu,"* and, apparently dissatisfied with the state of the roses, punctuated his tour of inspection by pointing out the mischief: *"Tu vois? Hein! Tu vois?"*—and a jab with his thumb.

The Captain, to whom Max presented himself, expatiated on what the property was like before he had acquired it and how it had gained by his labours, and as he showed an improvement—a new wheel on the well, or the cement groove at the back of the house by way of drainage—he would end each sentence with a sharp: *"Hein?"* which imperiously solicited admiring assent. He talked much of his being the *"propriétaire,"* and of Max being the *"locataire,"* and immediately requested three months' rent in advance, looking suspicious till Max had put the money on the table, when his face lit up with a smile and he said, as he pocketed the notes: "I don't care whether you pay me today or tomorrow. Have an *apéritif*."

The *apéritif* consisted of grapes dipped in pure spirit and preserved in a jar—a beverage, as he was careful

to explain, of his own making. While they sipped at it the Captain put on the gramophone and looked at them out of the corner of his large, dusky eye, spying for appreciation. "His Master's Voice," he explained as the disc rolled to a finish. He had ordered this gramophone direct from London as he wished to have the best that money can buy. And he added: "I like *les anglais*. They are very wells—*hein?*" And he lifted his forefinger gravely. Yes, he was glad his new tenants, like the old, were *des anglais,* and he desired to live with them in peace and good will, in fact as one loving family, and as he was now taking his wife to the seashore he would be glad to present her to Monsieur Fishaire's lady so that they four might all go down to the seashore together like one happy family—*hein?*

Leaving the gate he took Max amicably by the arm and marched him on, the two women lingering behind, Mme. Bernard staggering perilously on heels that were too high for her. She was a tiny woman and he was a big man, and she wanted to minimize the appalling difference in stature so as to lessen any possible post-nuptial regrets that he might entertain on her account. They had been married only a week. But he could not be bothered to wait for her and always strode half a mile ahead. The Captain, who shouted and raged all day long and deafened the neighbourhood with his gramophone, remarked of Phyllis to Max: "I like that girl. Like my wife, she is quiet. I like quiet women. I cannot do at all with one who shouts and makes a

noise." Striding ahead with the Captain, Max wondered what Phyllis and Mme. Bernard could be talking about, neither knowing a word of the other's language. When later he rejoined the Captain who, despite the same linguistic difficulties was conversing volubly with Phyllis, Max asked what they were talking about. "I am explaining to madame," said the Captain, "the strategy of Toulon in the Napoleonic wars."

"But in what language?"

"Spanish and Italian," he said with a grave mien.

"But she doesn't know a word of it."

"Women," he replied, "like dogs, can follow the thoughts of a good man."

At the little restaurant on the seashore the Captain ordered a vast dish of snails and mussels and two bottles of red wine and proved himself very hospitable. Yet neither Max nor Phyllis felt comfortable. The reason, though neither would admit it to the other, was that they were frightened of the Captain. Here they were in a foreign land at the tender mercies of this huge barbarian: suspect, and sensitive to what it implied. And contrasting with the strain and discomfort which their hosts inspired in them there was this soft, dreamy autumn afternoon reminiscent of the spring, and a voice, like Caruso's, rose from the harbour: "*Céleste Aïda . . .*" and they saw a man gesticulating before a group of fishermen. What a sweet, mellow voice!

That evening the Captain and Mme. Bernard sat in

Max's tiny dining-room while Phyllis made coffee on the newly purchased Primus stove. The kitchen hearth would not draw and the Captain said he would at once despatch them a new one from Nice whither madame and he were going on in a few days to complete their honeymoon. The Captain as he sat there, bulky, all puffed up and red in the face from the wine and the coffee, spoke louder and louder, thumping the table with his fist to stress his sincerity. He was (bang with the fist) a man of few words but large heart. Yes. He was that. He had his likes and dislikes (bang!) and his new tenants he liked (bang!) because they were "*des gens chic*. Yes. I like the English very wells (bang!). They are *des gens chic*." And when he gave madame (as he referred to her in public) a child he would have an English nurse because they are very wells. And the best was good enough for him. Foch had had an English nurse: hence his greatness. But for Foch's English nurse (bang!) the war would not have been won (bang!). It was not the British Army, it was Foch's English nurse (bang!) who saved the situation: supplied stamina at the critical hour. He thumped the table and looked challengingly at Max. Max nodded.

Yes. Tears came into the Captain's eyes when he said that he was not *propriétaire* and Max was not *locataire,* but they were brothers who shared everything, and to show he meant what he said here was the key from the shed where he kept firewood, of which Max was henceforth to enjoy the freedom on a

par with himself. Max, in return for the offer of the freedom of the Captain's shed, hastily offered him his horse dung. The Captain did not seem to hear, but dazed by his own generosity, repeated: "Everything."

"Yes," said Max, "use my horse dung for your garden."

"Everything!" They must have no secrets from each other and Max was welcome to his firewood.

"And you to my dung," said Max.

The Captain made light of this gift since giving at this moment seemed sweeter than taking. "All my firewood," he cried, *"all.* Here is the key of the shed. . . . Though, naturally, not to sell," he added suspiciously.

"Naturally not."

Phyllis and Mme. Bernard also essayed an approach to a condition of sisterhood, though it did not come quite so naturally to them.

In the morning the Captain drank one litre of coffee and milk and ate a whole great cake from the *pâtisserie* across the road. By twelve he was hungry again, but his wife not yet being back he followed Phyllis, whom he had seen return from the grocer's, to her own kitchen and said: "What have you got there?" and inspected her purchases. *"Ça va,"* he pronounced, and ate up all the cheese and sausages and tinned salmon she had bought for Max and herself and washed it down with a bottle of wine. He refused porridge, how-

ever. He did not like milk food and called it *"le pudding."*

"You're a fine one!" he jeered as he caught sight of his wife struggling on her high heels up the dusty road, loaded with purchases. She had been to market and was late. "Come on! Hurry up! I've had nothing to eat!" he cried piteously as she appeared at the gate. He looked very gloomy. *"Vas! vas!—Vas! vas!* Tell me another!" he sulked when she told him she had been delayed by the tram. Then: "What have you got there?" She: *"Biftek et moules."* He: *"Ça va!"*

Mme. Bernard borrowed Phyllis's Primus stove to lose no time in preparing her husband his lunch, and presently she called out to him: "Ready!" He threw off his tunic and rolled up his sleeves, rapidly seated himself and, before she had time to do likewise, raised his knife and fork towards her as she quickly began to help him from the big dish, while he accelerated her work by pushing off with his knife large heaps of food on to his plate; and while she was still helping him, he was already eating, hurriedly, passionately, devouring large chunks of meat, mouthfuls of celery, carrots, potatoes, on, on, and on, tearing off half a loaf at a time and gulping it down with the rest. And while he ate she opened one mussel after another and he grabbed them as fast as she opened them and chucked them into his mouth, and if she got stuck over a mussel he went on with the other dish placed before him, on, on, and on. An hour later he devoured a whole

loaf of bread with a litre of coffee, and a little later sent his wife to market for a couple of rabbits and a hen which he devoured head, feet and all; and at night he slept in the kitchen so that if he felt hungry he might get up and rummage for food.

The Captain proved amiable and hospitable. All the time he kept saying: "Do what you like with my place. Eat my grapes. Use all my fruit. Pluck my flowers. Burn my fuel." And he presented Mme. Blackadaire with a rose; then stepped back a pace to admire it. "I like the English very wells. They are very wells. *Ce sont des gens chic. Ils ont la galette.*" And he snapped his fingers in the air.

Victor had stored his trap with Mme. Pétain, his gate not being wide enough to admit it. Max questioned the convenience of this. The Captain at once undertook to build a new gate for the trap and a trough for the horse. He undertook to instal a new stove as required. He undertook to instal electric light. He stopped short of undertaking to instal central heating. Expense was no object. Max and himself would share all expense like two brothers—*hein?*

Yet they would dread the Captain's arrival. Each Saturday none the less he arrived by the eleven-fifteen and presently they heard his loud vibrant voice: "Fishaire!" Their impulse would be to hide in the rocks from this brute in man's guise. They would look at each other helplessly and know they had been trapped for yet another week-end. Gramophone,

apéritifs, meals together, fishing together—they were in for it.

The Captain's favourite meal was *cochon sauvage, bouillabaisse,* shrimps, snails, cockles and mussels washed down with red wine—a taste that neither Phyllis nor Max exulted in. But there was no avoiding it. The Captain after standing a meal immediately required a return of hospitality and remained unpleasant and suspicious until he obtained it, feeling somehow that he was being made a fool of by the English, a nation, as Napoleon had said, of shopkeepers with *la galette* and to spare—yet seemingly mean. A nation which required their own gallant ally to pay her debts of money to them after shedding her blood in a common cause for *la gloire,* and, moreover, kept down the rate of exchange. *"Ce n'est pas gentil,"* he said.

Accordingly they did not delay in inviting Captain and Mme. Bernard to a show in town, followed by a sumptuous dinner with champagne and liqueurs, at the end of which Max even offered his guest a cigar. The Captain was satisfied. More: he was touched. Once in the street, he took Max by the arm and said tenderly: "Of course it's expensive—nobody disputes this. But what will you? Nowadays one pays everywhere hand over fist. But you must come and stay with us at Fréjus. We shall ask you. To make up for it."

Each being, however outwardly coarse and seemingly brutish, has his holy altar, a shrine before which he kneels in humility. The Captain loved France, of

course, and *la gloire,* but more tender, more intimate than this was his love for his gramophone. Max found that out when Phyllis and he conceived the idea of borrowing the instrument in Captain Bernard's absence. The latter was shaken. He was completely taken aback, looked a little wan, then really blushed to the roots of his hair and said: "I'd rather not . . . if you don't mind. It is a sensitive thing. It is used to my hand, my touch." He closed his eyes with tender melancholy. "It was brought all the way from London. *'La voix de son maître.'* Truly named thus. It can serve but one loving master. Ask me anything else. But not that." And he put on

Couche tu
Chez ta tante
Ou veux tu
Coucher chez moi;
Le moment est épatante
Fait ton choix:
Dépêche toi!

looking round at them as if to say, "How it can sing!" He preferred loud, determined pieces.

XV

What a winter! What miseries to endure!

"We're going down to the Riviera?" Phyllis had asked him, beaming and incredulous, in London.

An honest man, Max qualified: "The *New* Riviera."

"Is that near Nice and Monte Carlo?"

"Oh, near enough," he had replied.

But Nice and Cannes and Monte Carlo were so far, so far, that for all the difference it made to Phyllis she might have stayed in England. Her life consisted of going to the *epicérie* two or three times a day with instructions scribbled by Max on the back of an envelope, buying an eighth of a kilo of ham, half a kilo of cheese, and some nondescript stuff to throw into the soup, reading the price of the things by the fingers the Italian woman put up for her benefit and being swindled in the doing. Once when Phyllis demurred inarticulately the Italian woman lost her temper and flung back irritably, "Come, tell me what you want in plain French. I haven't any time to waste." Phyllis, with a superhuman effort, returned, *"Jee voudray si jee coudray, mais jee ne canney pas."* Eggs, thank God, they bought from Mme. Pétain, who, to save them trouble, as a rule sent Loulou with them, who delivered them unwillingly. Milk was brought to the house by a grimy milkmaid who delivered it at unforeseen hours, and, if they were not on the spot to pay her, took it away again, so that they had to go a mile to fetch it, or, if they preferred a short cut, they climbed over barbed-wire fences in the slush and the dark, when dogs barked ferociously at them and even snapped at their heels. Nor did the weather favour them. It rained for weeks on end. Poor Pauline was exhausted. The roof leaked. The chimney would not draw. The Cap-

tain's boasted drainage proved ineffective. The walls were so wet that Max's boots got all green and mouldy inside within a week of arrival. Apart from the Captain, who came at week-ends and ruined two days of the week for them, and Mme. Pétain, whom they tried to avoid, and the Rodérics, a pious family of neighbours who practised Adventist rites with a vengeance, they had no company but their own; and an exchange of opinion invariably ended by dusk by their slamming their doors and withdrawing into their selves, Max to his cubicle, Phyllis to hers. And beholding his life abroad with the girl whom he had courted to subdue the pain of his separation from Sheila, he said, in Byron's words: "And to what have I conducted myself?"

They had made a few friends among the French naval families of Toulon. But their presence would have been more welcome separately, easier to explain. The penalty of a liaison, it seemed to Max, was that the lover must suffer the discomfort of hearing his mistress say in public what he has already heard her say to him in private. Lovers, invited to dine out together, were thus perpetually fated to make fools of each other. Inevitably. Verity loses colour in repetition, and however true one's partner's remarks may have seemed once, their truth at last appals one. Max's trick of vanishing round the corner suddenly without telling where or why, a habit acquired through long years of an exacting marriage, reappeared with disconcerting fre-

quency, and so also reappeared the justification for such action proffered to Phyllis, "You know"—a pained twitch of the mouth—"I've had rather a bad year."

The consequence of such partial sequestration was that Phyllis clamoured for her children; and since Pam and Ben could not travel alone, Phyllis stipulated for the exportation of her mother, who would defray her keep and travelling expenses by combining the devotion of a granny with the duties of a nurse, thus cutting out the weekly thirty shillings Max paid to Mrs. Carr. Max sucked at his pipe, weighed, calculated the probable risk and contra-disadvantages—and found the proposition was reasonable. "It will be nice, darling, for you to have your own mother to look after you a bit."

A week hence Loulou was able to tell his mother that he had seen a small old English lady arrive by steamer with a little girl and a boy; and Mme. Pétain, quickly putting on her best dress, went round to the villa to make the acquaintance of Phyllis's mother. A soft, boneless woman, she looked a little bewildered because, knowing no French, she could not complain to Mme. Pétain's understanding, and Phyllis, who knew her mother had it in her to complain a great deal, discouraged Max from interpreting. Mme. Pétain, who was inquisitive, would have been willing to listen, and Max, not yet wearied, ready to translate, and the old lady cast eyes of mute reproach upon her daughter, who must spoil the opportunity with her heartlessness.

Max pictured Phyllis as a little reed of a girl with a ginger plait walking hand in hand with her mother, who, a widow in later years, could not bear living away from her only child; how the two wrote to each other each week, trembled at the news of a cold in the head, at the thought that one day death needs must part them, and who, now having met, eyed each other uncharitably. "Mother, that will do. We've heard it all before."

"I haven't," said Max.

The old lady looked up at him with something like tears in her eyes. Everyone else thought her selfish, but Max, when Phyllis said to him, "Mother's so selfish," only sighed: "I know. Egotism is at the root of all our troubles. The snake in our garden. Born into the world of Time, poor things, it is the only food we thrive on."

The two little Rodéric girls walked up and down the road with their rosy arms twined round each other's little waists. They came up to make the acquaintance of Pam and Ben, after which they all played together at Mme. Pétain's, and Loulou was there, too, not so much playing as spying upon what the others were doing. The Rodérics were always having new children. The youngest girl but one, blonde, one eye blue, the other brown, both pretty, was barely two, but Mme. Rodéric, who carried a baby in her arms, clearly indicated by her contours that yet another was on the way. The total, at present, was seven or eight; and behind them stood a tall, earnest-looking father with a black

beard who believed in the end of the world and read Adventist sermons to his good-looking family in whose artificial limitation he accordingly did *not* believe, and went to town each morning to carry on his little business, selling typewriter accessories, erasing rubbers, ribbons, carbons. When, in the evening, loaded with parcels, he came home from business, his little girls would run out to meet him at the crossroads and hang hopping on either of his arms, while a boy, all wide awake, trotted in front with half the parcels, and a buxom daughter ran out to meet him at the gate, and his wife, child in arms, met him at the door.

There was an elder boy, eighteen, home from his Adventist College where he read for Holy Orders, who played hymns on a broken piano brokenly, in anticipation of the Judgment Day. The brightest of the lot, Marcel, aged twelve, eyes and limbs brimming over with life, kept watch over his little sisters when they strayed into Max's garden and shooed them out of the stables when they threatened to get too near to the horse, himself rushing across to help Max unharness Zaza each time he caught sight of the trap at the crossroads, and full of good advice. He admired Max. "Men like you must be in demand by women."

"Why?"

"Because you have a horse and a typewriter. Such men are rare."

"Oh?"

"Women are quick to discover a man's worth. They are shrewd judges."

"Is that so?"

"Et puis vous avez la galette."

Max soon became known to the *quartier*. When he walked along the big road at midday, little girls and boys would pass him on their way home from school and pipe out: *"Bonjour, Monsieur Fishaire!"* And he would reply: *"Bonjour, ma petite Madeleine. Bonjour, ma petite Ninette."*

It was a wet winter. Pauline had great difficulty in keeping the steps clean. She had to run back and forth to the well to fetch water. And what a pest this was! Sometimes the rusty chain would come off the wheel and the bucket would remain stranded halfway up. Pauline coughed, longed to go home, longed for the approach of Sunday when she could go to the cinema with her boy and be rid of these half-witted *anglais*.

XVI

In the meantime, heaven was still pending. Pending heaven, Max had put on weight. And one way of furthering your happiness while marking time, and thus precipitating it, is to take reducing exercises. Riding is one way of doing it. Max tried to ride Zaza, with no success. "Monsieur" Emile had told him it was impossible. Zaza lay down every time. Nor could he get through the gate with his trap. Though the Captain

had said that he had the knack of getting things done in a day which others, less gifted in handling men, took weeks to accomplish, he seemed not in the least surprised when, arriving each successive Saturday, he saw that the gate and the trough had scarcely progressed at all from one week-end to another, but beholding the devastation benignantly from the terrace of his villa, shouted down to the workmen: "Come up and have an *apéritif!*" In the meantime the calendar had advanced. When the cold and wet weather was over, the sun at once dried up everything, and it was summer. In this clime nature was apt to jump a season: there was no spring—or they hadn't noticed it. Suddenly it had become very hot, suffocating. The long afternoon was devoted to rest. A dog barked lazily and at night snapped at your ankles. The almonds were ripe. The Captain took his vacation and lived weeks on end in his villa. All day long he sat on the balcony in his shirt sleeves with a shotgun, and shot peas and stones at the boys who pinched the almonds down at the fence and swore at them in Provençal peppered with Italian dialect. "It's stronger than French," he explained. "A little of it goes a long way." The Captain indulged in some fishing and bathing, and they could not escape partaking of these pleasures with him; and he pinched Phyllis in the water. And after that there was the gramophone and *apéritifs.*

The heat had swallowed every vegetating thing, including the workmen engaged on the gate and the

trough, who during most of the day slept unperturbed in the stable, close to Zaza's hoofs. One of them, an Arab mason, said as he stretched himself from his sleep under the horse's hoofs, "Monsieur, why don't you ride that horse?" and, told it couldn't be done, swung himself across bareback, hit Zaza over the head once and again, and galloped away in great style. Next minute they saw him raising dust on the high road. He pretended to have lost his purse during the gallop to give Max the opportunity of compensating him. Zaza galloped home, panting and sneezing, but terribly chastened.

Since then Max could ride him. And he let Marcel mount him, who, asked if he liked it, said, "It is my happiness."

"He has found his heaven, while mine's still pending! He has caught the moment, the happy boy! There, he's astride it!" Max watched him exultingly. Marcel, whose feet could not reach the stirrups, rode at a walk, and his little sisters, Loulou, Pam, and Ben watched with mouths open.

At last the gate and the trough were accomplished. The Captain said, offhandedly, what the whole performance had cost him—about three times the price estimated—and suggested halving it with Max like two gentlemen. "I like the English," he said. "They are very wells. *Ils ont la galette.*" Max paid what was asked of him.

Dissatisfied, however, with himself, Max at the end of a week's brooding, sent the account on to Victor.

There was no reply.

He wrote again:

"I think it is only reasonable that you should pay at least one half as, after all, it is your horse and trap and I am only the sub-tenant, whereas you are the tenant and would eventually benefit by having the gate and trough."

No reply.

Victor's silence, Max said, confirmed the opinion he held on Victor's attitude towards money. When Phyllis stuck up for Victor, Max said: "It's just like a woman to take sides against a fellow who has delivered her out of the hands of a bully and to side with the bully. Yes, I am beginning to think Victor is right. They like being bullied."

"I don't know what bully you're talking about," Phyllis replied, "unless you mean yourself. You're trying to bully him into paying for the gate you had no business to construct without first asking him. Is that what you mean?"

"Not a bit clever," said Max, "if that's what you're trying to be."

"I wish I hadn't come out with you," she said, after a pause.

"I wish you hadn't."

"I'll go back."

"God speed!"

"All right," she said. "All right. And at once." She got up and paced up and down several times, for it occurred to her that there was nowhere save her own room where she could go. "Oh God, how I regret it! Pam, stop crying," she said, irritably.

Whereas Max, locking himself up in his cubicle, thought what a mistake he had made in binding his fate to such a one as she who had two children and a complaining mother for whom he, a struggling genius, must now provide, who flirted with other men on the beach, while bullying him, telling him what hat he must wear, overpowdered herself, put on too much lip salve, and dug gold out of him. "And to what," he thought, "have I conducted myself?"

XVII

Like Byron, Max took to horse to enhance his appearance, and when asked out to lunch by his French friends at outlying *châteaux* he would come up the long drive at a gallop astride his little Zaza. Max cultivated the gallop because at a trot Zaza was wont to stagger uncertainly with his forelegs as if the load were too much for him, and at a walk he was apt to lie down. Even a canter was not reassuring; so—leaving well alone—Max stuck to the gallop. Since he was usually late, no woman or man would see him arrive. But, lunch over, they would notice his riding-boots—"Ah, you've come on your little horse!"—and troop into the

garden to see him ride away. Here, however, his troubles would begin. Cajole him as he might, Zaza refused to budge and lay down on the ground time after time, till the other guests, and finally the hosts, one by one wearied of the spectacle, retired out of sight, when Zaza suddenly jerked forward and galloped off, with Max clutching to the saddle, and perhaps a hand in a top window signalling, "God speed, at last!"

Once, being stuck with Zaza on the road and unable to make him move, he heard a family of work-people comment, with Gallic sarcasm: *"Bon pour le biftek."* Thoroughly disgusted with Zaza, Max decided to exchange him for another horse, and took the opportunity of going away alone to Juan-les-Pins on the pretext of seeing a horse-dealer in Fréjus—one funnily enough named Horse. "An improbable name," thought Max, "and the joke, such as it is, is wasted on his French clients. But Stendhal has an Horse somewhere—a Colonel Horse. Impotent, if I remember rightly. Not that that has any bearing on the present situation." In such reflections, Max whiled away the journey.

On the gay beach of Juan-les-Pins he met Lysette, a youthful nymph whose very bones seemed springs! She was sixteen, pretty, desirable, and when he held her up in the water because she could not swim the blood rose to his head, and he loved her. And when that night he waited for her on the beach to take her to a dance he met Yvette, who came to tell him that Lysette had been impertinent to her mother, who

punished her by sending her to bed, and hence Lysette could not go out with him. And so he took Yvette, who was nineteen, of classic face and body; and so taken up with her was he that he put up at the pension owned by her mother, where also stayed Lysette, and there was an appealing chambermaid, and an English nurse on the sands who afforded him pleasure. Again and again he telegraphed to Phyllis that his departure had been unavoidably delayed. It annoyed him that there should be this Phyllis waiting for him, a drag on his resources which she used, it would seem, mainly to put a brake on his pleasures, while all these others who existed in financial independence of him seemed to ask for nothing better than to be allowed to minister to his happiness and prolong it free of charge. At Antibes he had to wait a considerable time for his train, as only local trains could drop him at Fréjus, and arrived in Fréjus, an unholy barrack-bestrewn place where coloured soldiers marched with their queer swinging gait, looking thoroughly out of their element, he hurried to the horse-dealer's. Finding him out and with only half an hour to spare, Max left a message at the café frequented by Horse that he desired to replace Zaza with a more reliable, even if slower and older, horse, and dashed off to the station.

Phyllis was very angry with him. She had been left in uncertainty all alone night after night, with no adequate protection. The Captain and Mme. Bernard had been over during the week-end and they and the

Rodérics and Mme. Pétain all thought it very cruel of him to have left her behind. Not knowing how to account for his remissness, since if he were to tell her of his pleasure it would not, in her eyes, excuse him, yet anxious to console her, he said that he hoped as a result of his visit to Fréjus they would presently enjoy the services of a quieter and more reliable horse.

"Oh, you have seen the new horse?" she said, excitedly.

"The matter is receiving attention," he said, briefly. "And how's my little Pam?"

XVIII

Next day a letter came from Horse, very illegible and without stops or capitals and signed "A. Horse." He understood the present horse was too young and too quick and that monsieur desired to exchange him for a more mature if older animal. He was looking out for such a one and, when found, monsieur could come up to Fréjus to inspect him, after which the exchange could take place. His one desire was to please monsieur and he was always at his service. Next a telegram came from Fréjus which reached them by long relays through the mayor of the village, who had sent the big drum with it on a bicycle. The telegram, addressed to "Max" instead of "Fisher," said that Horse was on his way to see him.

Early in the morning Max heard a taxi rattling out-

side the gate; then a violent ring at the bell, and as he looked out of his bedroom window, there was Horse standing just beneath him on the gravel path. "Don't you let yourself be disturbed," he said, amiably. "You go back and dress and I'll look round at my leisure." Max dressed, then came down and rejoined Horse. "And while you've been dressing," the other said, pleasantly, "I have sharpened a pencil."

Simple and sensible.

The taxi was still rattling in the road. Horse looked at Zaza just once; then touched the wheel of the trap, also just once. And then said: "Yes, I'll change him for you. I've one in view. A fine specimen of an animal."

"What colour?"

"Grey. He'll be somewhat bigger than yours. A fine breed of a horse, a real Arab."

"All right for riding?"

"First rate. A charger. Used to belong to a cavalry colonel who rode him all through the campaign in Morocco. Hated parting with him."

"What made him do it, then?"

"Well, it was time, he thought, the horse had a rest, took it easy."

"Why, is he old?"

The horse-dealer shook his head. "Middle-aged."

"What is that?"

"Have no fear. He's just the right horse for you."

"Not frisky?"

Horse shook his head. "Tender, tender," he said, "like a lamb. He won't move till he's told to. The little child," he said, pointing lovingly to Pam, who was peeping round the corner, "can drive him without danger."

Max had visions of a friendly grey horse, a wise and proven friend, driven by Pam and Ben, turning his head round affectionately to see that the children were all right, before stepping out gingerly.

"And now for the terms?" Max screwed himself up, fearing to hear a prohibitive figure.

To his surprise, Horse asked for no money. "It's the same," he said. "I take your horse and I give you another horse. A horse costs three thousand francs. I take a horse, I give a horse. It's all one to me, you understand? I take your horse. Whether I sell him again or get him killed, the price is the same—three thousand francs. Whether dead or alive, a horse costs three thousand francs. So, you see, I take horse and give horse." (Horse tended to drop the article as if to facilitate the understanding of French to a foreigner.) And as if to dispel Max Fisher's mystification he illustrated the transaction with his hands by reversing the position of his right and left forefingers on the wall of the stable.

Max Fisher had understood perfectly. Any horse could be had for any other horse without paying any extra. It seemed wonderful—and a little incredible. "So that's all right, then."

"Quite. All in order. I send horse. Then I come and take horse." He looked critically at the trap. "The trap is rather too small," he said, "for new horse. You won't be able to see where you're going."

"Won't it do?"

Horse shook his head. "I'll change your trap, too," he said. "Give you a better trap."

"Is that the one I've seen in your garage—with the yellow wheels?"

"The very one!"

"All right," Max said. "Horse for horse, trap for trap."

But Horse shook his head. It seemed this could not be done in the case of traps. Traps were different from horses in that some traps were worth more than others. And the new trap was worth more than the old trap—nine hundred francs more, to be sure.

Max considered. "Six hundred."

But Horse shook his head and strode back to the taxi, ready to depart. "Nine hundred," he said, "or nothing doing," and he got into the taxi.

"All right," said Max.

"All right," said Horse, slamming the door to. "Send you telegram. Bring horse and trap. Take horse and trap. All in order." And he departed, waving an indulgent hand.

"After all," Max said to Phyllis, "what is nine hundred francs? A mere seven pounds at the present rate of exchange. And for that a new horse, a handsome

trap. I've seen it at his door in Fréjus. And be rid of this ghastly animal, I hope for ever! These poor devils must make their money somewhere. One can't expect him to take all this trouble for nothing."

Next day there was a telegram from Horse, addressed again, despite the warning given, to "Max" instead of "Fisher." Horse wired to expect him at eight-thirty in the morning. Punctually enough he arrived, burdened with a brand new harness which he proceeded calmly to put on Zaza. But where was the new horse? Where the new trap?

"On the way," said Horse. "I am despatching them by train. You will have them tomorrow morning."

"I rely on you."

"Have no fear."

Before leaving, Horse dispensed *largesse*. That is to say, he opened his pocketbook and produced three ten-franc notes which he handed to Emile with the words, "Take care of new horse, won't you?"

Shamed by his unworthy suspicions, Max also opened his pocketbook and produced three ten-franc notes which he gave to Horse with the words, "This is for your stable-boy."

Horse nodded and pocketed the notes casually. Then, as silently, he manœuvred Zaza through the gate. That morning Zaza was more than usually obstinate and it took Horse fully ten minutes to get through the gate. Having done so, Zaza jerked forward and galloped away, Horse holding him back with some concern.

"That's the end of that beast, anyhow," Max thought, turning in.

XIX

Early next morning Max and Emile repaired to the station to fetch the new horse. Presently, as they waited, the long goods train came puffing into the station, and there in a special horse truck, his white-grey head projecting petulantly over the opening, was the new horse. Horse was as good as his word!

But when the railway officials opened the truck and led him out on to the platform, the porters like one man burst out laughing. His face red and twitching, Max stood there surrounded by porters, with Emile at the back of him, a confused grin on his face. "Is this what they've given you!" said the porters, and shook their heads at the depth of man's baseness and the height of his credulity.

The horse as it stood there in the morning sunlight, as if a little ashamed of itself, was certainly cadaverous, thin, crooked legged, hollow in the hips, and white with age and decay. There was one redeeming feature about the whole transaction: Horse, incurably befuddled, had again addressed the consignment to "Max" instead of to "Fisher," and, to the relief of the consignee, the authorities would not part with the treasure, and were welcome to it. On angry wings, Max flew to

the nearest post office and telegraphed to Fréjus, "I repudiate the horse."

Horse wired back: "Sorry. Will take it back. Writing."

For a day or two there was no news from Horse. At dusk, and again on the following evening, Max and Emile went by tram to the station with a sack of hay and oats for the horse, in pity of his nighted life, and fed and watered him secretly in the dark, on the side-track to which the truck had been shifted. They chose the cover of darkness, lest any claim might arise from the act of feeding the repudiated animal. Next day came a letter from Horse, very illegible, without capitals or stops, but amiable in tone, in the course of which he reiterated regret that the particular horse, as he gathered from Monsieur Max's telegram, did not meet with his requirements and enquired for particulars of the kind of horse Monsieur Max had in mind. He was anxious to approximate as closely as possible to Monsieur Max's ideas in this respect and was always at his service: Alexandre Horse. In a postscript he begged Monsieur Max to take charge of the grey horse for the time being and give him time to look out for an ideal animal.

"Nothing in the world will induce me to accept this cadaverous thing you have the temerity to describe as a 'horse,'" Max wired in response to the letter.

Nothing more was heard for a few days.

Then one morning Horse's stable-boy arrived with the tearful request from his master, whose wife was at death's door, to accord temporary shelter to the horse, whose storage in the railway truck was daily mounting up and threatened to ruin him; and Max consented to receive the horse on condition that the matter did not end there and that the stable-boy himself fetched it and paid the dues on behalf of his master. The stable-boy agreed reluctantly.

The old horse made a fairly good show as it trotted up the lane. The new trap was passable. The stable-boy would not part with the whip, which he said was his. "Arab horses, like Arabs," he said, "need a whipping."

The horse could not rise in the morning. Max ran for Emile, thinking the horse's last hour had come. Emile came, but could not lift it. He went to fetch Etienne—a filthy Italian peasant who had emptied their drains in the winter and seemed not to have washed since then—and with the help of the men and Mme. Etienne Max lifted the horse to its feet. After that Etienne and his wife came every morning to enquire whether the horse needed lifting in case Monsieur Fishaire intended to use it that day. It ate figs in the garden and exuded a strange odour—uncanny, like a corpse; and its white coat smelled not unlike an old man's beard. The horse was so despicable, so utterly beyond the pale of all decency, that it did

not have a name and no one thought of giving it one. It was called "it—the horse."

The Captain on his week-end visit inspected the stable. "What a swindler! Cavalry horse be damned! He bought it from the old woman with the apple cart in the market place. Why, I've seen that horse many a time standing there with the apple cart in the square." But Marcel, hearing of the swindle, said, gravely, "That won't bring him any luck." Mme. Pétain also came with Loulou, and so did Mme. Rodéric, who came again in the evening and brought her husband along, and all looked grave, shook their heads, and said nothing. People from all over the neighbourhood, tradesmen and friends of distant acquaintances would come and find their way into the stable, shake their heads: *"Sancta Maria!"* cast a side glance at Max, and go away silently.

Deeply humiliated, Max sat down and wrote to Victor:

"I have found your Zaza troublesome and have changed him for another horse which, though larger in limb, is not, strictly speaking, altogether satisfactory, either." With this he enclosed an account for nine hundred francs in respect of the balance paid for the new trap, adding, in a footnote, that he considered the price not unreasonable.

There was no answer.

"I consider," Max said to Phyllis, bitterly, on a cer-

tain morning marked by a total absence of letters, "that the horse and trap are now mine."

XX

How absurd his life, anybody's life, was, viewed outwardly. Looked at formally, the absurdity of it might be couched in more redeeming terms—born so-and-so, educated so-and-so, as in *Who's Who,* which reduced all these loose ends to becoming ciphers of respectability and necessity, under such heads as birth, death, education, occupation, publications, recreations, address, hiding any irregularities and inadequacies, or legitimatizing them biographically. "Mr. Fisher's life was one mass of blunders and incompetence, but it has made the subject of a neat biography brought out by a firm of publishers whose integrity and business ability are beyond question." But how rich inwardly, how full of suffering and compunction, hope, expectation and fear. Who could have guessed, for example, that his elopement with Phyllis, whose promise of love had seemed to him like an escape from himself, should have been coloured by anxiety and vexation over this horse affair? True, the affair was so trivial that he could not muster up enough wrath to get the better of Horse; yet a great chunk of his life was determined by that sly individual. His journeys, his love affairs, were shaped by him. Marcel Proust had designated a certain period of life as coming by way of an individual named

Swann—*Du Coté de chez Swann.* For Max this south of France epoch, with all its consequents and postulates, had come *Du Coté de chez Horse.*

He looked across at the Captain, who, in his shirt sleeves, had popped out on a dreary Monday morning at the break of dawn in order to take the Primus stove Max and Phyllis had left for him overnight, to cook his breakfast on before he caught his early morning train to Fréjus; and Max thought, *"Les pauvres âmes humaines!"* He felt sorry for himself and the whole world. Sorry for Phyllis. Sorry for Victor, from whom he had taken her away, and sorry for himself for having her on his hands. Sorry for the Captain's wife who had married him, sorry for the Captain for having risen above himself and then contracted an unfavourable marriage. Sorry that they were born, and sorry that they must die. But so incommunicable is human emotion that if he were now to put his arms around the Captain and say, "Poor old mutt! I am sorry about it. It is nobody's fault. I suspect, I strongly suspect, that somewhere, in the beginning or the end, you and I are one and the same," the Captain would stare at him and wonder what the hell he was talking about. Yet there was this man hurrying along the dusty road to catch his train; and here was he, Max, observing the alien mechanism in motion and sharing the Captain's state of mind. And above was the sun diffusing itself through grey clouds. Oh, wonder of wonders! When will you spread your wings and enfold me?

Unfold and enfold me? When will you give me a clue? I have seen the One in the many. When will I feel the many in one? So Max reflected.

The morning developed into a fine day. Pam and Ben had gone out to play on the sands in charge of their grandmother. The Captain had promised to see Horse about the horse and to induce him to take it back. "I've spoken to him already, but Horse says we don't swindle these English half enough. I am trying, however, to bring him round into a more favourable state of mind by a friendly manner with him. Anyhow, I will do what I can."

The Captain's promise was a load off the mind. It might miscarry; his representations, as he called them, might well prove ineffective. But his undertaking to shoulder the responsibility of negotiations relieved an immediate burden by placing it into that pleasant letter-basket known in office organization as "Pending." Meantime, life was livable. True, six weeks had elapsed and Horse had done nothing to change the horse. But now that the problem had evolved into a postulate dependent on certain action to be taken by a certain person, all was as it should be: it was pending. Something was always pending, and that was life.

Meanwhile, another problem awaited transformation into a postulate. The figs were getting ripe. Neither Max nor Phyllis could grapple alone with the problem of plucking and drying them. But the Rodéric family seemed to have been bred for the purpose. Would they

go shares with him? Apparently they would, on a fifty-fifty basis. But one morning Max, who had been dwelling to Phyllis on having had a bad year and on the injustice of his fate compared with that of other men, insinuated to Marcel that fifty-fifty was perhaps a little unfair to himself, that thirty-seventy seemed a more reasonable division of the figs; whereupon the Rodérics, with fine pride, returned all the figs. Marcel brought them all back and said papa begged to say he would rather Max kept the lot. Max found that Mme. Pétain would not even go halves with him. Emile and Etienne likewise refused. And when he offered Pauline to take them for nothing she said (as she had done when he had volunteered to take her to the dentist) that she would rather die. Max had to agree that figs were rampant. But must they therefore go to waste, because no one would brace himself to pluck them? "Not even if I'm paid for it." Phyllis and Max ate as many figs as they could till the sight of them sickened them. The over-ripe figs dropped on the ground. The old horse alone ate them, picking them up with his lips, chewing them with his protruding old teeth, gently swishing his bony flanks with a thin yellow tail.

As things go, life was tolerable. And he had been able to do a little work. He had completed his study of Swift. He was writing a satirical epic in verse, and gradually preparing, ordering, smoothing out the material for his great and final novel. But in other respects

his isolation here threatened to become ominous. There was only a handful of people about him—and what people! At the hands of such he could be either flattered or snubbed, exalted or humiliated, and because there were so few of them each individual acquired an importance absurdly beyond his real worth. In a city like London, with a population of nine million to choose from for companionship, one wouldn't have spent a half hour's thought on a man like the Captain or even a Rodéric. "Ah, London! When shall I see it again?"

How weary one got of a place like this where there was nothing to look forward to. Nothing! He looked disgustedly around him. Nothing but figs. Figs, figs, and figs!

Ah, there was the bicycle bell of the postman. If at least the post brought him something! What a portent, the post! Miracles in the phenomenal world came through the post. "What, a parcel! Give it here! Give it here! And from America, too. Significant. Lecture tours, commissions for articles, all sorts of things came from America! Duty to pay? How much? That's a tall order for a little box like that." He tore off the wrapping; there was a note. "As a mark of appreciation of your kindness in sending me your autograph," wrote a reader from Fresno, "I am sending you a box of our best California fruit."

How thoughtful and charming. Max opened a small

artistically decorated wooden box tied with a flaming orange ribbon.

There were two rows of dried figs, a total of twelve, neatly arranged with almonds spaced out between them.

XXI

Yet what he really lacked, he knew, was not the society of people, but the need of a woman who would absorb all his passion, concentrate on herself all his love so diffused, so scattered on little things—that tree, that rift in the clouds. Where was the girl? And suddenly he thought of Sheila, their last day in Tyrol as they sat hand in hand and watched the chain of mountains white with snow; and how she ran out of school to him at Oxford in the drizzle, gave him one kiss, and ran back. Would he never see her? Could life be so purposeless that he would never see her again? He refused to believe it. But what pains, what difficulties lay ahead if he went back on his resolution to forget her, if he raked up these feelings. These feelings, these feelings!

The horse affair, nevertheless, had exhausted him, lowered his spirits; if not shaken, at any rate loosened the hinges of his faith in mankind. The fig affair had shaken his faith in the individual. As the calendar was coming round to October, Max found that he had had yet another bad year.

At Juan-les-Pins he had met a young Spanish grandee who solicited him to launch out into journalism with him. The young Spanish grandee had displayed since his impoverishment considerable ingenuity and pertinacity, and his latest scheme was that a Madrid firm of Spanish delicacies should supply him with the funds to run a high-class magazine in England in which the firm would advertise its own commodities. Max was to be literary editor, while he, the grandee, looked after the commercial side. He was sure, he said, to make it a success. The scheme appealed to Max, but for a reason all his own. If there was one positive feeling in Max, it was his unbelief in the artistic or commercial feasibility of weeklies, fortnightlies, or monthly magazines of a high order. Such publications run on a belief in life (or art or letters) and beginning their abortive careers by an appeal to the illustrious writers of the day for the great men's cast-off linen, always ended, as they must, in disbelief in charity. This journal, of course, was to be different from all other journals. The young grandee had insisted that it was to "strike a new note." Yet when Max had asked what precisely the new note was to be, he discovered that the new magazine was in fact to be all that other magazines had been before it, except that it was to be "different." The young Spanish nobleman, moreover, displayed such astounding ignorance of English conditions that failure was certain. A Beaverbrook, a Northcliffe might found a new publication, in the teeth of adversity, on

mere faith in success. He, Max, was as eager to undertake the guidance of this magazine with unwavering belief in its failure. That was the difference. He was ready to do it for the sheer comedy of the thing; for the pleasure of sitting in the editorial chair, dispensing favour to contributors; for the chance it would give him in advertisement: "Four or five shorthand typists required immediately." And selecting from a long queue of applicants five of the best-looking girls. He left out this latter bit about the five typists when discussing the young grandee's offer with Phyllis, as this was not a point she could be expected to appreciate. But her prejudices on this point, natural to herself, could not debar him from admitting to himself that this indeed was a feature which, more than any other, had predisposed him in favour of the project. Women were always advising him to concentrate on one woman if he wished to taste the maximum delight of sex, meaning themselves. He, however, found that sex was something which dissipated in concentration, but that he never lost interest in women as a sex. The words "girls," "women" excited him. The thought of Mrs. Robinson excited him less. True, he singled out this or that woman from the rest, but it was womanhood in her which made him happy with expectation, and his disappointment always came when, concentrating on a chosen, the wonders of womanhood about her paled, vanished, as the individual in her, the dreary, wonder-bereft ego, which might have been a man,

came into focus. And as for money, Max would get a decent salary without caring a pin as to the contents of the magazine; and when the grandee fired him, as was inevitable, for incompetence, Max would sue him for a breach of contract. Phyllis doubted the morality of this. Max knew, and knew, moreover, that Phyllis knew he knew that she only said this because she was dissatisfied with him on other grounds. It occurred to him now that if he surveyed his life with Phyllis in the south of France, which had seemed like an escape to heaven at a time when what had begun auspiciously enough as the "Kennington Movement" developed into a living hell, their new life together would appear for the most part to have consisted of bickerings and vexations over the old horse. That much-maligned animal was little enough to blame for it. Anything else, Max opined, would have served the purpose of providing Phyllis with an excuse for venting her disappointment in him, who, having lured her to the Côte d'Azur, which, in her mind, stood associated with fashion and *hôtels de luxe,* must leave her to this! People said one thing and thought another, yet understood one another's thoughts better than the words which were a travesty; and then, oddly, clung to the words for real meaning. And so instead of saying to Phyllis that she was naturally dissatisfied with him, he said: "Immoral? Why? Since a magazine like this is doomed to failure, why should an editor like me, who sees it now, be any

worse than an editor who won't spy failure till it is obvious to all?"

"This generation is called by the one before, whose idealism and faith have given us the World War and the Russian revolution, a generation of unbelief." Thus Max already framed the leader for the opening number of the magazine. "We, the youth of England [Max always deemed himself a youth]—we, the youth of England, and indeed the present generation throughout the world, having seen the human wreckage wrought through selflessness and altruism on the true grand scale (to the discomfort of the individual), pin our hopes nearer home, on the individual himself, who is the first and last recipient of felicity, the suffering unit, in other words myself. And if I learn to solve my own unrest I will have done more towards bettering the world than if in setting out to right the world I grew bitter and entangled. In other words, we, the cream of the intelligentsia, are individualists."

The thought of an article, a provocative article, fired his imagination. He paced up and down between the fig trees and the vines, and his imagination ran ahead of him. Oh, for the loan of Victor's dictaphone!

"How do we (the youth of England) differ from them (meaning the older generation)? Hm. Hm. They were altruists, we are egotists; they enthusiasts, we disillusionists. Did we perceive some sign of shame and compunction in our fathers and mothers for having so high-mindedly sacrificed the individual in us to

the god automaton, we might have had more patience with their 'idealism' which has apparently suffered no shock. As it is . . . Hm. Hm. Their integrity—well, strikes us as theoretical and insensitive. They might sanction a revolting execution (the visual thought of which is enough to convince us it is wrong), for the sake of some vague ideal, such as civil liberty or national unity. They are ever ready to offer up real suffering units for the sake of an abstraction; plunge into war for whatnot shaky nationalist, socialist, imperialist, religious, secular ideals—only to realize ten years hence that the conduct of war, however imperfect, was more sound than the idea for which it was fought, the one redeeming feature of it all invariably being the heroism with which the rank and file of one army butchered another, followed by affecting scenes of mutual fraternization."

He paused in his pace. "Yes, I have in me the makings of a journalist!"

His disbelief in the feasibility of running a new magazine provided him, nevertheless, with a purpose for travelling to London. He bought himself new gloves, and as he stood on the station platform at Toulon, holding his attaché case, he was exhilarated by a sense of doing something important. Something beyond the scope of Horse, out of reach of the Captain, out of sight of the figs. . . . He was travelling first class. When Phyllis demurred at this sudden decision of his in the travelling bureau, reminding him

that he must not count on a magazine in which he had no faith, Max said the grandee had been known to succeed where others had failed. He had, for example, obtained a magnificent office free of rent at the back of a furniture shop, the owner of which thought that the grandee's friends coming to the office to see him might be tempted to buy some of the furniture. He paid nothing for his room at the hotel, having arranged with them to advertise the hotel in a Madrid magazine he represented. He was good at what the French called *"s'arranger,"* and there was no telling that the magazine might not succeed, after all, and that Max might not get enough money from them without suing them for breach of contract.

At any rate, he called on Lysette in Paris and took her and her mother to the cinema, where Lysette sat close to him and was rude to her mother for treating her as a little girl. On coming home her mother had an attack of asthma and she had to resort to a flask a few steps from her own door.

But on reaching London Max learnt from the grandee that not even the future failure of the magazine had, if one may speak thus, succeeded. The Madrid firm of Spanish delicacies had refused to put up the money and the scheme had fallen through before having started. Max's funds were very low. When he was short of money he always spent more recklessly. It was as if he wanted to shame fate, to strengthen the resistance of the soul against the world. At such

moments he felt the need to live luxuriously. There must be a butler, a valet to press his suits, champagne, delicate food. To take him away from the sordidness of everyday existence of which—he suddenly felt—he had had more than enough! Yes, he would borrow money at once and rent a flat at, let us say, Grosvenor House. Installed in an immaculate service flat, he would proceed to live consciously and by plan, filling out every moment, telling himself this was life.

But it so happened, he realized, that all the things he had planned to make his real life proved stilted and barren; whereas trivial and unforeseen things which occurred while he was looking away—that absurd horse affair, for example!—proved amazingly fertile, and when looked back on seemed to have been his real life.

It was a dreary autumn; rain fell perfunctorily. London, apparently used to vile weather, continued its activities undisturbed. But Max lay down on a sofa and reflected on his bad year in the south of France and found that everything which had happened to him, all the bright colourful pageant that had filed before him, was a commentary, a silent commentary, on the life of the soul. Phyllis was a commentary. Horse was a commentary. Yes—even the horse!

CHAPTER FIVE

The Rape of Lucretia

XXII

IN LONDON, things struck Max not so much as commentaries on, as illustrations of, the life of the soul. If he saw anything, whatever it was, he was no longer surprised, but said: "Hm! It just shows you ——" Though what it was precisely it showed he would have been hard put to it to express in any of Europe's leading languages familiar to him. When the Spanish grandee, having suddenly married into money, neglected to set Max on his feet by founding a magazine, Max rightly deduced that the grandee's happiness was complete without founding a magazine and without setting Max on his feet. Likewise, when his servant showed signs of neglecting her duties, Max read these signs symbolically as denoting a state of soul which did not find completion in housework. Or when a hostess who had been insistent on his coming down over the week-end, dismissed him on the Monday morning cursorily with:

"Well, next time you are in England ——" he was not hurt, not surprised, but noted inwardly: "My charm, apparently, like hers, is finite. She is quite right. Goethe, who in the course of a long life had gained knowledge of most human situations, counselled young Eckermann not to fish for heart-to-heart intimacies, since it was by approaching your vis-à-vis as a unit propelled by an ego not yours, that value was gained, respect enhanced, and dignity established between man and man. Social intercourse must be no more than cursory."

But, disciplined by an absence of illusion, if Max chanced to meet with sudden friendliness, an act of kindness, a gust of spring love—as with Lysette or Yvette—a Lizzie or Ivy in England—his soul, a little astonished, a little expectant, rose on tiptoe. Then, duly let down, he resumed his pedestrian stride. It was as it should be. Things have their harmonies, their natural beginnings and endings, and a touch of devotion is charming on the background of everyday egotism, which is the proper field of all produce. No vain regrets! A lifetime has its own curve, and when one thing ended or was drawing to a close, another began. And when Max found that his immediate neighbour in Grosvenor House was Cæsar Zeitz, Sheila's old guardian, he was not astonished. "It just shows you," he thought, "life is not without its dénouements: hereby hangs a tale."

When Max's friends deduced from his elopement

with Phyllis that his love for Sheila was apparently at an end, Max said, "Not at all." Their reading of the situation was at fault. His love for Sheila was the main thread of his life, to be picked up again at a convenient time. His life with Phyllis might be regarded in the nature of an excursion pending an ultimate realization of paradisiacal happiness with Sheila —postponed but not renounced. "Is that clear?" he asked. "Very well, then!" dismissing a questioner. He was sorry if he sounded peremptory; but a perusal of Goethe's, Shelley's, and Byron's biographies had convinced him that in this business of mistresses explicitness in a poet's own lifetime might do much to narrow down the margin of posthumous interpretation.

Emphatically he did not regard his south-of-France cottage as a permanent abode. He begged to hope he still had a future! It was the thought that, married to Sheila, he would take over her guardian's Grosvenor House flat which put the idea into his head to live there. The very ignominy of being unable to occupy the flat till Mr. Zeitz judged it convenient to expire, provoked Max into sinking his overdraft in a flat of his own. That the two flats should adjoin was indeed a coincidence, but hardly remarkable, since Max never saw Zeitz again. Noises he heard, yes: Mr. Zeitz seemed invariably to be in. Max hoped that Sheila, come to see her guardian one day, would encounter him in the corridor or the lift. But he waited in vain.

And when he could wait no longer, he boarded the

train and went, looking out for the spires and pinnacles and missing them as usual, when the train ran into the station at Oxford.

It was a cold winter afternoon, and everybody moved on bicycles: a professor, a don, an undergraduette in black cotton stockings, a green-grocer's boy—all moved on bicycles, moving the pedals with scholarly feet. Town and gown were on bicycle; and it was the one thing which moved, while the ancient colleges dozed, damp old veterans with chilled bones and cold contempt for youth. The pond in Worcester garden was frozen. The swans walked angrily on the ice. All was frozen, even thought. And one dreamed of old times, mail coaches stuck in the snow, postilions with red noses. And there was the red-blue reflection of the winter sun in black windowpanes. And here in the garden she met him.

Later he drank tea with a hundred schoolgirls, Sheila's companions. She hated school and most of her hundred companions. But she never stayed long at one school. Cæsar's trickeries, she explained, extended over all the ground he trod. He had put her into a good school, or rather, in the course of four years he had put her into ten good schools, because at the end of each term he did not pay the school fees. His wife had thought it petty of him; but he would have thought it unworthy of his grip on life to concern himself with such a trifle one way or the other. If he

tricked these schools, he did it unwittingly, lifting them along in his stride.

Max learnt much from Sheila's account of her life with her guardian. She was adopted when she was ten, for no other reason, it seemed, than that Cæsar (as she called him familiarly) had no children and wanted a girl. She was well treated by both husband and wife, who, as they grew older, began to resemble each other more and more in appearance, and apart from Cæsar's refusal to pay her school fees she was spoilt, and so happy that when, a little time back, she was summoned by Scotland Yard to give evidence against Cæsar Zeitz, she flatly refused to do so and stuck up for him. After all, she said, eagerly, there were confidence tricksters and confidence tricksters and it was sheer ignorance to confound them. There was the man who brought home a watch or a pocketbook that he had persuaded some guileless visitor to these shores to exchange for a time for his own in confirmation of the mutual trust recently established between them. And there was the man, like Cæsar Zeitz, who went in for large transactions only. Cæsar owned a country house with extensive grounds and a swimming pool. It was there that she had spent her childhood. Cæsar invited well-to-do people to stay with him over the week-end and then to invest five thousand pounds in some new enterprise. He himself, unlike his enterprises, had never come to grief. No one had

ever cornered him. Now living in Grosvenor House, his life work behind him, he had acquired a solidity even in the eyes of the police, and Scotland Yard had ceased to trouble itself about him. There was such a thing as achievement.

So much, and more, she told Max. And when Cæsar Zeitz died she was to have all his money, which brought in fifteen thousand pounds a year. "Then," she said, "we can get married."

"But when, when will that be?" Max asked, impatiently.

"He's quite old," she said; "he can't last long. Besides, I am very fond of him and I should be sorry if he died too soon."

"Cæsar's death," said Max, "might be a calamity, I agree, but his survival is a disaster."

"Why want the poor old fellow to die before you've obtained a divorce? Let him profit by the delay."

"Ah! Life! Life!" Max mused. "Pending heaven all over!"

XXIII

It was Armistice Day when he returned to London, at the hour of the silence; and during these two minutes he thought of Sheila, thought of love and of the fallen who might have loved, but who were dead for evermore. A lorry rattled near by. Abuse from the

silencers. Reports of the usual incidents in the newspapers.

Max wired to Phyllis that he had been delayed, and sent her money. He had opened a new account in a new bank and had secured a new overdraft. He lived, loved, and waited. At the end of the Michaelmas term Sheila was sent down from Oxford, as Cæsar Zeitz had not paid her school fees. Disgusted with Cæsar, she secured employment in a modern furniture shop and pronounced herself an expert in "interior decoration." Her employer, a young Oxford man, had ideas, or what is called "vision"; he expected shortly to revolutionize our ideas of furniture. One of his conceptions was a table suspended in midair by four balloons. The advantage of this, not at once apparent to the enquiring purchaser, was that it afforded him the opportunity of kicking his heels under the table, never quite possible in the case of a table with legs. Moreover, there was in the spectacle of the four gaily-coloured balloons supporting your writing or dinner table a suggestion of friendly endeavour, of loyal companionship. This Sheila explained to the would-be purchaser. She explained in the offhand manner of a thoroughly up-to-date, modern girl who felt sorry for the purchasers if they did not see these advantages for themselves. Another novelty was a one-legged chair, maintaining its equilibrium on the revolving-top principle, the seat remaining stationary while the leg revolved

electrically. The idea behind this invention was to give the stationary sitter an illusion of action.

Her young employer, Roy Marcus, emerged as a serious rival to Max. What attracted Sheila in Roy was that he had biceps like a boxer. Max, to qualify himself as a lover, ran in his bath every morning and used a vacuum rolling-pin to reduce his figure. But Max was a writer and could intimidate with a favourable press cutting and give away books of his own composition, and Sheila prided herself on knowing at once what was literature and what was "bilge." Presenting her with his latest, he was about to write in it, "To darling Sheila from Max." But Sheila objected. "It's so crude," she said, and suggested, "Beautiful Sheila, I love you."

Having accepted a post with Roy Marcus at twenty-five shillings a week, she declined any subsidy from Cæsar Zeitz and lived entirely on her earnings. Sheila had no clothes at all—only a red leather cardigan with a "zip" front, and no sleeves, a bit of a skirt, and a pair of stockings and shoes. At Easter Max took her to Cornwall, where they stayed at a romantic hotel towering over the cliffs. That evening they sat in a summer-house, hands locked together, and next morning they walked by the sea. "Carry me," she said, "as I do not want to wet my feet." He lifted her with a simulation of ease, but nearly ruptured himself. He remembered Emile telling him of his rupture, which

made him self-conscious when he was about to *faire l'amour*. "In a perfect world," Max thought, "heroines won't expect you to lift them. Or else they will have the weight of a feather." And that night she danced in a bit of a gown she had evidently made herself. She, however, looked the most beautiful girl in the room. On closer examination, Max noticed that the gown was held up by a safety pin on either shoulder. In the course of the evening the top part of the gown slipped down and revealed her breasts. She noticed it an hour later. "Heavens!" she said, "How awful! Why didn't any of you tell me?" she turned round on the men. But none of them had seen their way to break the news. And because they looked a little ashamed she said, "What are you blushing for, you lot of virgins?"

And like a gazelle she jumped into his bed. He had dozed off and was startled and a little surprised. But she flaunted her "unconventionality" in the face of the universe. Diffidently he made room for her. "Darling, so young. . . ."

She hugged herself against him. "When I was thirteen a man kissed me—and I trembled all over." And he was indignant at the man and, taking her in his arms, all soft, pliant, and yielding, he protected her from those invisible debauchees who would assert their own pleasure at the expense of her exposed innocence.

Then they opened the window on the balcony. The

sea roared. The ship of a million years passed in the dark. He could not see it.

XXIV

The difficulty was that neither Max nor Roy Marcus was eager to be first in the field, and the two men watched each other warily round the corner. Sheila thought their shirking of responsibility was absurd, and Roy's biceps attracted her. He was considering a vexatious conundrum arising out of his invention of a new chair suspended in midair by balloons: how prevent it sagging unduly under men and women of uncertain weight? Sheila suggested using ballast. Roy Marcus demurred. Furniture of the future was not to be the rule-of-thumb affair it had been in the past, and the invention of a chair such as his might well entail more than a smattering knowledge of aeronautics. Sheila looked at him attentively. He was well made, and he was clean limbed, though not very clever. "Mary laughed last night at my being a virgin. It's absurd."

"Her laughing at you?"

"No. My being a virgin."

"I don't see," he said, "that there is any great hurry to dispose of the encumbrance."

"You're absurd," she said.

"Why?"

"Oh, you're ridiculous! You're not a man, or you wouldn't talk like that. You've no character."

"Oh, haven't I?" he said, advancing on her.

"Well, anyway, take off that ridiculous morning coat. You're absurd!"

He took it off, and now it seemed to her that he looked rather like a waiter clearing away the tables at the close of day.

The lamps glared. "Put them out, Roy, or turn them down—some of them."

"If you like, though it's rather in keeping with my ideas of modern life. The tendency to conceal nothing. You know what I mean."

"Yes, leave it. I hate stuffy Victorianism."

Very well, then! He'd be neo-Georgian, fling away all restraints. Dare! dare! dare!

But she cut him sharply across the face with her palm.

"Why this?"

"Because you're such a fool, that's why. You idiot! You silly idiot! You damned, damned fool!" She pushed him away and rushed out of the room.

He stood there some time, having mechanically replaced the morning coat, hurt, humiliated.

XXV

"Grosvenor House," she said to the taxi-driver. It was raining. But Max's flat, tucked away in a labyrinth

of corridors, a nest in the giant building, seemed a shelter from wolves and the weather. There were, he noticed, tears in her eyes, and when she put her arms round his neck he said, anxiously: "What is it, my sweet?"

She stood there gulping. "Walls, corridors, central heating. . . . How nice!" As the minutes passed his voice and manner grew more tender and protective. "But who is it?" he cried. "Somebody has hurt you, my love, obviously. Who is it? Who?"

"Roy . . . Marcus." The name came out, it seemed to him, unwillingly, as if she were shielding the man.

"What did he do?"

"Never mind."

"What did he do?"

"Oh, nothing."

"But he made you suffer, he made you cry."

"Because he's such a silly fool," she said with sudden vehemence.

"But how?"

"Because he's such a fool." She stamped her foot. "Such a *damned* fool."

She sat down and hid her face in her elbow.

One glance at her in this telling position—this telling position—was enough for him. He walked resolutely into the little hall where his coat hung on a hook and took down his hat.

Then Max was ringing the bell of Roy Marcus's shop; and when Roy, one hand idly thrust into his

striped-trousers pocket, opened the door, "Oh," said Max, absently, his mild grey eyes looking serious. "May I—er ——"

Roy had thrust his other hand into his trousers pocket and, leaning languidly against the wall, he let his glance travel the length of Max's body enquiringly.

"Well ——" Max averted his eyes. Then with sudden resolution, "You . . . *cad!*" he hissed and turned round to go, since his mission was ended and there was no sense in looking for trouble.

"Oh, look here," Roy said, hastily, "come, be good enough to explain yourself."

Max's upper lip stiffened into a thin line and his face assumed a glassy expression. "Some things," said he, "*cannot* be explained, and your treatment of Sheila —the poor child is in hysterics—is one of them."

"Quite," said Roy. "Some things cannot be explained . . . between one man and another with a girl in between."

"Some things," said Max, with sombre gravity, "*I'll* never understand."

"Quite."

Max left.

Roy Marcus now asked himself if he was offended or not. And he decided he was.

Within an hour he was in Max's flat. Roy's soul was shy and uncertain of procedure, but his boxing habits brought the man out of him and he gave expression to his wounded feelings in a Tunney-like

thrust. Sheila, beholding the inhumanity of man to man (the wrong man), nevertheless felt sure it was all right.

But Max said Roy Marcus had shown himself in his true colours; they had better avoid him. Nothing was gained by their staying in London, where they might meet him again. Had Roy himself not said to him, "And don't cross my path again"? The amenities of London life Max thought were greatly exaggerated. He could, by letting his Grosvenor House flat at a profit, live comfortably on the margin, anywhere in the south of France. Max painted a fascinating picture of Tamaris and the people—the Captain, a thoroughly good sort; Emile; Mme. Pétain, rustic but true; the Rodérics, really *good* people, real human beings every one of them. Of Phyllis he only said he had a secretary on the spot who helped him with his work. "I'm pining for the south, the hot sun, the blue sea, and bliss and bliss!" And there was bathing—and other sports.

"Can you drive a car, Max?"

"Badly. I say badly because, never having tried, I assume I would not be able to drive well."

"So there's no car?"

"No. But we've a horse."

"Riding?"

"Well—there's a trap. And lovely scenery, and more fruit than we know what to do with."

Sheila was ready to go with him, but before doing

so called on her guardian and asked him for a hundred pounds.

"This is blackmail," he said.

Sheila laughed. "Don't be absurd, Cæsar." She called all men, old and young, by their pet names.

"Ah, well, if you will have the money, who am I to say no?" Zeitz was sitting up in bed.

At the booking office she muddled Max frightfully by thrusting pound notes on the counter before him while he paid for the registration of the luggage.

"No, I must, I will pay for myself."

On board she paid her own expenses. "How different from Phyllis," he reflected. But Phyllis was obedient, while Sheila was not. When he had ordered Phyllis to lie down in the cabin she obeyed, even though she said that the mere thought of going there was sure to make her sick, but that if she stayed on deck she might get over it. "Go down!" he had said; and she went. But when, as the darkening shore slanted away, he turned to Sheila, commanding her to go down to her cabin, she merely said, "You're absurd!" And he did not press the request.

The coast of France was advancing to receive them, with its fields and orchards, hills and sunsets, and a basking shore.

It was her association with Grosvenor House, her flitting from the Ritz to the Berkeley, yet unwilling to accept a present and going about in laddered stockings and without gloves that made him book a room in one

of the smartest Paris hotels. Sheila slipped her clothes off with the same impatience that had delighted him in Cornwall. How safe she might have been with him. It brought tears into his eyes when he reflected on the fatherly, protective attitude he had displayed that night at the hotel when she had jumped into his bed and he had taken her in his arms as if to shield her from a host of invisible debauchees crouching round the bedstead. Roy Marcus had made this heartfelt attitude impossible, nay unnecessary to sustain. Roy had knocked down her defences; there was nothing more to defend. Yes, Roy had obviated the vigil.

"What are you thinking?" she said, diving under the bedclothes.

"Of that blackguard. I doubt if I will ever quite get over what he has done to you."

"The fool's too big a fool to have done anything."

"Oh?"

"What do you imagine?"

"I don't understand. He has, surely?"

"Don't be absurd. How could he, a fool like him?"

"He hasn't, then?" Max's tone was almost an alarm. "But why?"

"Because he's such a fool—such a damned fool. That's why."

"Damn the fellow!" thought Max.

"Of course," he said, after a long pause of reflection, "it isn't, when you come to look upon it rationally, it isn't so much a question of what is done in

this life as *how* it is done. In the final reckoning style counts for more than content; treatment more than theme."

But it was Sheila's comment, to be taken as a reflection of her opinion of him as a stylist, or not to be so taken, "Go away. You are very crude," which disposed of the question.

XXVI

He opened the window: fresh air, early morning. Sheila lay in bed, crumpled up. The sun was up, and they just awake, in Paris. Only to think of it: Paris! And again, as, in the evening, he paced up and down the platform of the Gare de Lyons he felt a flood of energy released within him. He could do things now. How nice this contact with the throbbing life of a great city, trains coming and going, passengers bound for fascinating destinations. This great terminus of Paris. His mental energy, released, bounded forward along a network of railway lines. How nice to be an engine-driver, or a commercial traveller. To go about from place to place, see life, study human nature, witness human ingenuity in the great stores of commerce and industry. What a life lay outside the restricting, crippling life of sex! They walked up and down, waiting for the train to start. "How strange it is," said Max, "that at the thought of sex a man will sacrifice all intellectual joys and gladly settle down in some

God-forsaken place to what seems to him an unending orgy of lust; but the very moment after, he will hate it, think he will never want it again, but would rather do without it and live in Paris."

"In Paris, without it?" asked Sheila, incredulous.

"Well, perhaps not in Paris," Max admitted. "But that is not the point." He sighed.

XXVII

It was Sunday. But Emile was at the station with the old nag. Sheila and Max got in in front, Emile at the back, and they set off quickly, driving alongside the canal, past the slaughterhouse remarkable for its strong smell sensible at a distance, crossed the tram-lines, and were already reaching the mixed odours of the pig farm and the tanning factory. And when they drove up the lane Sheila saw a little girl with blond curls and a chin interfering with the bowls of the villagers playing *boule*. "Pam!" Max called. "What?" she said, without moving.

Mme. Pétain was already there to greet them. "Loulou had seen you," she said. Mme. Pétain always got in the first word everywhere. Phyllis stood by her side, a little lost and bewildered. Max introduced Sheila, who, it occurred to him now, had rather a funny name. She was called "Miss Crazy." From the first Phyllis showed signs of wanting to speak to Max, and when they were alone she demurred, as he expected she

would, to Sheila's arrival. Max's expression became rigid. "I don't believe in Dawnism, as I have termed this disease. I have no faith in panaceas, Leagues of Nations, crusades, socialism; in a word, I don't believe in collective action, which is nothing but a failure to find in company with others what one has failed to find alone. This belief that collective action will solve the troubles of the individual is repugnant to me. But I do believe in being kind to those in one's immediate vicinity. I think the least one human being can do for another is to be kind and helpful: that is my idea; and when you learn what this poor child has had to go through at the hands of a brute of an employer, the humiliations she has had to suffer for a crust of bread, you will be the first to love her. For, let me tell you, Phyllis, you are kind at heart despite a somewhat frigid exterior."

At this Phyllis melted a little. Sheila instinctively adopted a railing attitude towards Max to discount Phyllis's thinly veiled contempt for her. That contempt was founded on a thorough understanding, for Sheila's conduct was a variation of Phyllis's own. But Sheila could not have justified herself by an appeal to precedent, since she did not want to be like Phyllis, for whom she entertained a general contempt. Her attitude was free and playful. "I don't believe you are at all well known, Max. At least, nobody that I have ever spoken to about you seems ever to have heard of you."

Phyllis looked at her and said, gently: "You see, you have not mixed with literary people or the people who read modern books—the intelligentsia (she pronounced it 'intellijentsia'). All the clever modern people know Max's books."

"But it's absurd," said Sheila. "I know lots of people who do nothing else but read books, send novels backwards and forwards from the libraries, and they have never heard of Max."

"I should like to see the novels they read," Phyllis said, sarcastically. "Probably Elinor Glyn or Edgar Wallace."

"Not a bit," Sheila defended herself, hotly. "They read modern authors—Michael Arlen——"

"Michael Arlen!" Phyllis ejaculated with pitiful scorn, and instead of looking at Sheila looked towards Max with a sort of look of freemasonry between them, a freemasonry of intellect and understanding. She was still, as it were, "working" on her book, *Robert Louis Stevenson*—"collating material," she said, and she deprecated the absence of libraries in Tamaris and other facilities for research. She often said so with a sigh to Max, who in response sighed accordingly: "Ah, well! It is life."

The morning after her arrival Sheila, feeling a sudden absence of motive but unwilling to give way to it, strolled about, whistling. Seeing a typewriter, she snatched off the lid as it seemed to her playfully, but as it seemed to Phyllis brutally, so that Phyllis winced

in excess of her own sensibility, largely as a remonstrance to be absorbed by Max and as an overt reprimand to Sheila.

"Have you anything for me to type?" Sheila asked, gaily.

"Can you type?" asked Max.

"Of course I can!"

"With two fingers," he said with what he felt to be a lame attempt at "leg-pulling."

"Don't be absurd," she said. "I can type as well as anybody."

Phyllis stiffened involuntarily at this remark and said, with a strained smile, "Shall we give her a test?"

"I can take down anything you say in shorthand," Sheila tossed direct to Max and over Phyllis's head.

"Well," he said, "what about that article of mine on Ben Jonson?"

"I will fetch it down," said Phyllis.

He dictated in a slow, kindly manner, giving Sheila a chance to take it down, if need be, in her best longhand calligraphy, and when the passage was finished Phyllis promptly took Sheila's notebook and examined the script.

"Not bad," she said. "But you don't seem to connect the outlines much. Your shorthand is a little elementary; but very neat and firm all the same," she hastened to add for fear, Max knew, of being thought jealous of the chit. "Of course, Max, your dictation is ridiculously slow."

"I will type it now." Sheila proceeded to do so, very prettily, Max thought, with little laughs and a hunching of shoulders when she got stuck over a word; and this appealed to him, for it somehow revealed, brought into prominence, her slender, nude, girlish arms which projected from the red sleeveless "zip"-fronted cardigan. But Phyllis did not warm to these antics; these absurd little laughs as it were dishonestly charging Max with absurdities which were really the girl's own. And when Sheila had finished typing her script and, handing it to Max, said, "Do you really like this jargon? I am sure there's nothing in it. At least, I can't see any sense in it. I think you are just pulling your readers' legs, Max, by using words that nobody has ever heard of," Phyllis took the typescript from him in an accustomed, matish way and, reading it through, murmured now and then: "I like this, Max. . . . I think this ought to read 'anyway,' not 'anyhow.' I like it better. . . . I think, Max, this sentence is superfluous. You've said it before. . . . Ha, ha, ha! This is rich. It is the best you have done yet, Max," handing him back the script.

"What a cat!" Sheila thought. But she giggled prettily and said, "Distinctly original, Max!" Then rose and went into the garden and began to eat figs.

The roses. The crocuses. The horse. "I must ride. You must teach me to ride, Max."

Suddenly he felt he had his work cut out.

But whenever the domestic situation got too much

for Max he sought to remind himself that Shakespeare, too, married heedlessly and chanced the consequences and made the best of them. Diffidently he explained to Phyllis that one day he hoped to marry Sheila. Their marriage was pending on his own divorce and the impending death of Cæsar Zeitz, who was to leave his ward a handsome fortune. Max would then be able to provide for Phyllis, since, he added, it was none of his fault if she could not, being a Catholic, divorce her husband. She must not be a dog-in-the-manger. After all, £15,000 a year was not to be sneezed at, these days.

"Or any days," said Sheila.

Stripped of passion, Max's nature became as light-hearted and crystal-clear as Mozart's. It showed itself in purity and grace, in wit and mirth and the entertainment of others, the ability to console a crying child, and sympathy with old people. Yet his trick of suddenly running away without telling where or why continued.

"Where you going, Max?" Sheila cried.

"Er—it's all right." He would make off, swinging from the hips.

XXVIII

Summer had come round again. The Captain again sat on the balcony all day long with a shotgun and threatened the village boys, intent on stealing the

almonds down at the fence, in southern argot peppered with Italian. And again they were invited to go fishing with him, to eat *bouillabaisse,* shrimps, snails, cockles, and mussels. At four in the morning he was up and pummelling at their shutters. Willy-nilly they rose and, sleepy, they trudged to the seashore in a thin file, like convicts driven to work.

But the perfect purity of the morning! No sun yet. You could hear the rustling of the grass; the stillness was transparent. Light on the water, rock and sand. Unearthly quiet. And deep in the untroubled waters somnolent fish brooded: the Captain said, "Ts!"

Having caught a score of miscellaneous nondescripts good enough for *bouillabaisse,* he advocated bathing before sunrise, and he pinched Sheila in the water: "A small-bottomed race these English, *hein!*"

Trudging home, Sheila, with the Captain's help, climbed an almond tree in a private garden and filled her pockets. But a youth ran out and set dogs on their heels and aimed stones at them, and the great bulky Captain, Sheila, Mme. Bernard on her high heels, and the rest of them had to run in shame and ignominy. And in the evening there was "Valencia"!

Max explained to the Captain, who had been buying new records, that "Tristan" was among the most passionate manifestations of love recorded, as it happens, in music, a medium analagous to human love. Indeed, if the public realized what was happening just before King Marke's return they would—so somebody had

said—call for the police. *"Tiens!"* The Captain cocked one eye and snapped salaciously with his fingers. The news restored his confidence somewhat in the record. When he had come in from town with his wife, the "Tristan" record carefully wrapped under his arm, the sky had been dull and drops of rain pelted the hard, dusty road, and the Captain had looked glum and said in a tone as though Max had presumed on his good-nature unduly: "Well, here it is. Sixty francs for this one record. We have bought it on your recommendation. We don't know at all how it will turn out. You made us buy it. We could have had three regular comic records for it." Now Max's tale about the police reassured him. "I thought it might be a swindle," the Captain said, "but we chanced your word for it. That's why it's so expensive, I think: police prohibition. It must be full of *cauchon,* what!" And he looked lewdly at the company.

"My God! it's more than that!" Max exclaimed. "Far more than that! It is as necessary for the human soul as food is necessary for the body, as sex-love is necessary. How could people have lived without it, passionate, romantic natures especially?"

Sheila opened her pink pouting mouth. "If the fools knew what they missed they would never forgive themselves. If they had 'Tristan' they would need no sex."

"No, no," said Max. "Both are necessary, both are legitimate. One supplements the other. Neither is quite complete without the other."

This interested Mme. Bernard, who sensed a lack of the romantic in her husband's nocturnal advances. She looked dreamily at the gramophone which the Captain was winding up in preparation for the great treat which had cost them sixty francs. To Mme. Bernard Max told the story of Tristan and Isolde, and she reciprocated by telling him the story of Manon, and her own story, for the third time; how her husband had first seen her on the balcony in Corsica, had sung a serenade to her, had picked her out of a crowd of maidens at a ball at which he was the most gallant of suitors; how then they lost sight of each other and after the war she had come across his name in a newspaper mentioning his transfer to another *dêpot,* wrote to him, met him, and induced him to marry her. But the Captain had already put on the Prelude and raised his fat finger to ensure silence.

It could not have been said that the Captain and his wife had not been prepared by Max to receive the "Tristan" record with favour. But Wagner, actuated solely by æsthetic motives, had not foreseen how undesirable, how objectionable, indeed, from the standpoint of a consumer of gramophone music who lays store by quantity no less than quality, could be the unusually long pauses of silence which at the beginning of the Prelude separate the few initial drawn-out notes. The Captain who had never paid more than twenty-five, thirty francs at the most, for "Valencia" or even Caruso, had been persuaded to disgorge sixty francs

for this dark horse of a "Tristan" because the rather larger size of the record made him think that at least there was more music on it. Now, to his discomfiture, it seemed that the record—large, yes—was chiefly composed of long pauses of silence, blank like the grave. This hardly looked like getting value for your money. He cast a baleful look at his wife. Was it possible that *les anglais* had "done" him, a simple-hearted soldier of a valiant republic? And the composer? Said to be a *Boche*. His wife returned the look, and both listened to the Prelude, with the yawning gaps filled in by the acute scratching of the needle, somewhat stupefied and puzzled. Emile also looked puzzled. The Captain looked round from one listener to another. Not much need for calling in the police to stop that! His look lingered suspiciously on Max. But at that moment the orchestra burst into a splash of sound and swelled on an upward-rising tide of emotion. Max looked at the Captain as if to say, "Here it is coming—the reward of your trust and patience"; and the Captain looked as if to say, "That's better." Mme. Bernard looked at Phyllis as if to say, "We women understand passion all right." Phyllis closed her eyes and nodded her chin as if to say, "I and Max have lived through this with our own hearts and know what beauty is." And Sheila looked curious and expectant as if she thought, "We've heard of this thing they call love. Well, let us have it and know what it is."

Emile had sat down gingerly on the edge of a chair

at the door, with a shy grin. The Captain looked at him, with a significant nod at the gramophone, the 'cellos now having descended into tones of extreme gravity. The Prelude fizzled out, expired in protracted death, during which the needle scratched and throbbed in a death rattle. Emile grinned in deep, blank wonder. "What are you grinning for, you idiot?" the Captain flared up. Then turning to Max: "I understand this is fine, superior music—*c'est de la musique fine*—not for everyone. A peasant like Emile can't understand it, of course."

"Why, I, too, understand this is *d'la chic musique,*" said Emile. "Even in our regiment we used to have a band. . . . This is English music?" he asked, since nobody answered him, turning to Max.

"No, *Boche.*"

"Ah!" said Emile, "the *Boches* are good musicians, nevertheless."

When, however, Max offered to buy the record from the Captain for sixty francs, the Captain readily agreed. But he looked unconvinced, as one to whom promises are as moonshine, to be discounted by worldly wisdom which puts its trust in deeds before words. Max read this look, and groped for his breast pocket. At the sight of the pocket-book the Captain's fears were allayed, and when he saw the fifty-franc note and a ten by its side on the table, his conscience rebuked him for his unworthy suspicions and he felt small. He cleared his throat and said: "You can have it played

whenever you like. It is yours now, although I will keep it here for you, as you have no gramophone." And he pocketed the bank notes.

When, in the morning, Max went down to the stable with Emile and Etienne and Mme. Etienne to help the horse to its feet, Emile, with a nod at the Captain's house, whose shutters were closed and the occupants asleep, said: *"Et alors, lui*—he there—he thinks only he alone understands music. But I understand that this is *d'la chic musique*. My brother has a guitar and can sing 'La Tosca.' " Emile essayed: *"Luccicavono le stelle . . .* Good, isn't it?"

Max patted him on the shoulder and assured him that he knew more than the Captain, since it was not possible to know less.

XXIX

Emile still looked after the old horse pending a new one, and he did so with distaste. Horse had committed himself, under pressure, to the extent of a telegram in which he said, "New horse deliverable July." One waited, one hoped. And heaven, Max suspected, was no more adapted to getting what one wanted than life, but was a place where one no longer wanted anything.

The elder Rodéric boy, again home for the holidays, flirted with Sheila. They all went off to the sea to bathe the old horse. Max resented young Rodéric's in-

fatuation for Sheila—unseemly, he said, in a theological student. But Sheila was brutally frank in her answer and told Max he no longer "amused" her, and never attracted her. "How could you? Look at your face."

He looked. It was a red face. He had heard more than one woman say that he looked like a farmer or a grocer. He disagreed, begged to differ; they lacked the sensibility to see how fine withal this high forehead, how firm and noble the nose, how sensitive the nostrils, how mild the eyes. He pulled his tie and gave a little self-conscious cough.

"But look at my small hands."

"They're the most absurd hands I have ever seen. The thumb sticking out apart like nothing on earth."

He moved to her for a kiss.

"Go away. You bore me."

He remembered how they had sat, hands locked, in Tyrol and gazed at the long white chain of Alps and said nothing. And now that they could open their mouths, they had nothing better to say than this!

And then summer also was over and there was a season of rain. It seemed to Max that nature wept at what it had done in giving birth to that subversive, mischievous thing, our mind, wept unceasingly at its mistake and would not be consoled.

CHAPTER SIX

The Abduction of Helen

XXX

PHYLLIS, who could live neither with nor without her mother, found no rest till she had caused her parent to betake herself from the Riviera, after which she began to look forward to visiting her mother in England. This, Max thought, was not unreasonable; and he scraped up the money. The money, Phyllis thought, might be spent more profitably on buying clothes, and she rang up Victor and enquired whether she might come and stay at the old flat. From her account of Max, Victor learnt that if life with Max was trying, it was at least as difficult with Phyllis. "Max is so irritating. He thinks everything I say is wonderful. The most ordinary thing about the weather—everything 'How true! What extraordinary insight!' One simply ceases to try to be clever." Victor had laughed inwardly. "And this awful habit of suddenly disappearing—suddenly up and gone before you can say Jack Robinson. 'Max, where you

off to?'—'It's all right, dear.' And I get so angry with him. When I was coming over we walked together along that road to the station and he wouldn't let me use my lip stick. I got so furious I left him. I said I would go straight back to you when I got to London and never come back to him. He followed me to the station and we had coffee together at the station buffet. Suddenly he rose and made for the door. 'Max!' I cried. 'Where you off to?' But he was gone. I had nobody to help me with my luggage. Only when the train pulled out of the station and I looked out of the window, there was Max running along the platform, very hot and red and bothered, with a bouquet in his hand. No time to snatch the bouquet. And there he stood on the platform stretching the bouquet towards me as the train pulled out of the station."

There was a pause in which Victor thought how bitter and nerve-racking it must be for Max, who, conscious of the depth of his commitment, could not face the thought of letting her go and be left with nothing, to realize that he could never hope to inspire in her a respect for his own gift, even for his literary standards, when he was startled out of such reflections by Phyllis's saying, "I am writing a book on Robert Louis Stevenson."

"Oh? And what is Sheila like?"

"If you ask me, a little bitch. That describes her."

When Phyllis was in the taxi she bent forward to

kiss Victor. "Promise me that if I can't stand Max, you'll have me back. Promise me, will you?"

Victor smiled non-committally. As the taxi withdrew she blew him a kiss and Pam, because her mummy told her to blow a kiss to Uncle Victor, would not do so. He returned the kiss foolishly.

He stood on the pavement and thought: how time passes, emotion abates, dies, and how on the whole he had nothing but to congratulate himself on the successful liquidation of an affair that could not lead anywhere. Poor Max!

Max's letters to Victor in the matter of the horse, claiming refund of the money expended in constructing a new gate and trough, and again for changing the horse and trap, did nothing to ease the tension between them. Victor had not replied to these letters. The account remained unsettled. But when he heard that Max was once more back in London, Victor took the opportunity to ring Max up to invite him to meet a musician friend of his, the "promising" Helen Sapphire, who, if he asked her, would play "Tristan" to them on the harp. Max's attitude on the telephone was grave and suspicious. No, he preferred not to listen. "I was sorry," Victor wrote a week hence, "that my attempt to raise the medium of reconciliation from eggs to music should have met with no response."

This "got" Max. He had had a bad week in London. Nevertheless, he would meet Victor at Helen Sapphire's today. "Yet suppose," Victor thought, "Max has grown

above Wagner and instead of raising, as I suggested, the medium of reconciliation from eggs to music, he shows himself carping and critical of Helen's performance and says, 'No, this does not get me.'"

They met, smiled, shook hands. Each man seemed overcome by his own chivalry. "What moves me when I reflect on the whole affair," Victor thought to himself, "is the consistent nobility of my behaviour." "No one so quick to forget and forgive as myself," Max thought. "Nothing like being magnanimous!" Tact kept Victor from broaching the subject of Phyllis. Instead, he said, "How did you find life with Sheila? To be together at last with the one girl one loves—ah, the felicity!"

Max wrinkled his face as if in pain. "Ye-e-e-s. I know. . . . Ah! Life! Life!"

"And how's the Captain?" Victor asked, eagerly. "How are the Rodérics, and Mme. Pétain and Emile? I often think of the good old days and could wish them back again, when I could bask for months on that blue coast. Why must I go and tie myself up in this grey, nebulous metropolis?"

"You've got to live away from it to know your luck," said Max. He loved that great, sprawling, liberal-minded city where you did as you liked and everyone was so sensible. "No, never, never again must I leave London!" It was sheer common sense to live in one's own country and reap the benefit of one's popularity "which cannot now," he said, "be long delayed."

And the moment Max came into the room Helen ogled him. A welcome sign! There was no doubt about her friendliness, her wish to please; which was refreshing after his experience of Phyllis and Sheila. When she said something, Helen Sapphire invariably gave a little laugh of appreciation as if bowing in acknowledgment of the public applause—before it was forthcoming. And sometimes it did not forthcome. Then came another little laugh, a trifle more wistful. "Little me," she was relating something to Victor, "among all these grown-up people! Imagine my nervousness. But he laughed and said: 'You're just a little girl, in spite of your genius. You'll never grow up.' " And she laughed again the little laugh of self-approbation.

Max scanned her face: she must be well over thirty. Her figure, however, was quite young, and her neck was graceful like a swan's. "Am I safe," she asked, looking from Victor to Max, "little me all alone with two men who insist on my playing voluptuous Wagner, which I never do? Look at my hands—how small and white compared with your own, Mr. . . may I call you Max—my big friend Max? I am really a very frightened little girl."

Outside, the rain had stopped. The large L-shaped room overlooking the quiet solidity of Knightsbridge contained a Bechstein grand piano and two gilded harps; a new, shiny one, and a disused model with torn strings. All the six walls were covered with hundreds of Helen Sapphire's own photographs; Max

could not see the wall paper. There was the scent of some strange, unpleasant ointment. One half of the room was in twilight. A clock in the square chimed six.

She bowed her dark head on the long neck and began. So far Max had only heard muffled orchestra sounds on the gramophone, now drowned in ominous screeching, now completely outwitted by piercing, whistle-like shrieks of "Isolde" through which emerged breathless gasps of the orchestra as if endeavouring to struggle through to freedom. Now Helen tore every sound out of the great gilded marvel of ironmongery so that every note resounded in his heart. She played fumblingly, sometimes going back—only to carry the point. "This is lovely," she said, never having played it before. She closed her green eyes, shook her head on the swan neck, as if saying: "Too lovely."

What a woman! thought Max.

And it was unbearably lovely. What others only dreamed of, vaguely hummed, she actualized with her ten fingers, her slender beauty swaying gently on the chair. How these strains twined, parted, resolved, returned, retreated, advanced, and overcame difficulties, and grew and swelled and rose aloft and sagged richly and loved luxuriously. "This is too beautiful . . ." They created a plane more potent, more immediately real than the world before him. The conflicts, the difficulties, were more scrupulously faced, more gallantly overcome.

But the restless hankering extended, while Max

longed for fulfilment; one note would have quenched him, but that note was pendent, out of reach, deferred indefinitely; and it tortured him. And Max, struggling to his feet, groped for that note with one finger. "I must have it," he said. "Oh, give me that note! My life depends on that note. There! There! And again, there! Now I'm relieved, I can breathe, and smile at the comedy of suffering."

And, in truth, Helen herself was astonished at her performance of Wagner, which, of course, was not at all her *métier*.

"Why won't they let you play 'Tristan'?" Max asked.

"Out of the question."

"But why?"

"Look at me," she said. "My beauty and this orgy of music. They wouldn't stand it—the puritans, I mean. It would go to their heads."

And why, indeed, wouldn't they let her do things that went to the head? Cowardly puritans! She had been—how many years ago?—a little girl at the College of Music who lived on a sandwich snatched between music lessons, giving lessons to be able to take them and perfect her flowering gift. Success would come. But till then how many years of striving and waiting!

Giving advice outside one's own sphere is among the irresistible vices of mankind. There is a fascination in going out of one's depths. Life outside one's own rut appears more adventurous. In matters one knows

little or nothing about one feels oneself able to give clear-cut advice. One is not hampered by any sense of subtlety and cross-purposes of motive. One advises one's friends to go straight to the point. One suggests that they display such fictitious qualities as "courage," "perseverance," and so forth, and that the rest will follow. It is fascinating to advise a newspaper proprietor how to run his own papers; to say, "You must endeavour to increase the circulation." "How?" "By appealing to a wider public." Or to an author: "You must advertise your book on the front page of the *Daily Mail*." And it is pleasant to counter the newspaper proprietor's remark that the idea is not new to him, or the author's irritation when he says that a front-page advertisement in the *Daily Mail* is likely to exceed his royalties, with some such retort, "I am only advising you for your own good."

Accordingly, Max advised Helen not to be deflected from her purpose, but to head straight for her objective. In the face of her complaints of the difficulties which beset a comparatively unknown harpist wishing to secure engagements as a soloist, he counselled steadfast perseverance.

Because there was passion in his voice, she was not irritated. She begged him to go on, at the same time interrupting him with a recital of the opinions held of her by a number of distinguished musicians, Lord Cornet among them, authors, men of politics and finance. He agreed. Her playing was marvellous, her

touch superb, her technique little short of miraculous. All she needed was faith, courage, determination to go on, the will to conquer; and the world would be hers.

Did he really mean it?

Yes, he boomed, yes! He knew nothing about music, of course, but then was that so necessary, when facts, plain facts, spoke for themselves?

What facts?

Facts. She was young. She was beautiful. The harp was a rare instrument. Beautiful to look at. Nice to hear. It ought to be heard more. And it will be heard more. More and more . . . as time goes on. And the more it is heard, the more popular it will become, and the more popular it becomes, the greater the demand for artists playing the harp. The law of supply and demand. . . .

"I must practise," she agreed. "I will make a resolution: five hours a day every day, beginning tomorrow."

"You must absolutely."

Helen smiled happily. What a sweet man! To inspire her with new courage, new hope. "I promise you I will practise *eight* hours a day. There! And what is more I will begin here and now. This is a Chopin piece I am playing at Birmingham next Thursday."

Max closed his eyes. He envisaged a future more enchanting than the present. He has taken her over from Victor. He has taken charge of her neglected career, he, Max, a man of realities. A warm spring

night in Seville. They return to the hotel after a concert. It has been a great night. She is a little wistful, but happy; leans on him gratefully. "The applause, Max! We've brought the house down." No wonder. By God! how she can play. . . .

There was a violent ring at the telephone. Helen jumped up; the harp tilted back to a standstill. "That Colonel!" she cried. "I'm sure it's him. My next-door neighbour, you know."

She answered the telephone. "It is," she signalled to Max.

"Now we want to go to bed. We've had enough of this." The Colonel's voice, which could be heard at the other end of the room, expressed weary indignation.

She hung up the receiver and hung her head. "This awful man! He is the evil of my life!" She brought her small handkerchief to her eyes.

"What a brute!" Max paced up and down several times. Then stretched his hand for his hat.

Helen looked round quickly from above her handkerchief. "What! You're not leaving me?"

"I have a mind to go and tell that brute what I think of him."

"No, don't. I beg of you! I want to be friends with my neighbours."

"It's a damned shame. England's no country for music. Come to France."

"You live in France?"

"In the south of France. Near Toulon on a charming isthmus called Tamaris."

"How lovely!"

"It is lovely. Bathing all the year round, you know. And it's a nice villa with a lovely view of the bay and the breakwaters with the lighthouse described by Paul Morand. Emerald lights, you know. Beloved, he says, by sailors. His attention to these lights was first drawn by Bourdet, of 'La Prisonnière' fame."

"How *very* interesting!"

"Yes. He lives there with his lovely wife, on a cliff, high up above the bay. The place has a *cachet,* you know."

"How I understand that!" Helen said, with a sigh.

"A distinct *cachet* of its own. And we have a horse."

"Riding?"

"Y-y-yes, if you like. But there's a trap. You really must come and stay with us."

"Is there a musical set in Tamaris?"

"No, but our neighbours, a charming pious family called the Rodérics, very musical, have a piano. They'd love you to bring your harp. And the Captain who owns the property has a gramophone."

She pondered. "Is that a serious invitation?"

"Of course."

"I'll come."

On the house step she gave Max a look which meant much. All through the evening Victor had scarcely uttered a word. He strolled round the room inspecting

the photographs on the walls. Neither Helen nor Max seemed aware of his presence. When the two men were outside on the wet, gleaming pavement, "I have a mind," said Max, "to take her to the south of France. She sadly needs a holiday. That Colonel! What a brute!"

Victor turned a quizzical look on his companion. "'Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?'"

Max stopped and faced Victor on the pavement. "'I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.'"

"Expensive, Max, this multiplication of matrimonial entanglements."

"I know," he sighed. "But, after all, Shakespeare also married heedlessly and chanced the consequences and made the best of them."

"And left his wife his second-best bedstead, stipulating that the mattress did not go with it."

"Goethe, like yourself," said Max, "by a sort of fatal instinct of self-preservation carried his relations with his loves to a dead end, so that they had no choice but to leave him, when he reproached them for their desertion, shed tears over the brevity of love, and, having distilled such poetry as he could out of the flower of memory, settled down to his freedom."

"Yes. But Goethe, when Christiane Vulpius was in peril of discourtesy, married her, against his own convictions."

"And I," said Max, "have offered Helen shelter from a brutish Colonel, who insults her for her music while I—the shame of it!—can't get it. And I am ill for it. If she comes, we'll have Wagner all day."

"I am a little tired of it," Victor said, dryly. "And it is not so good as Mozart."

"Good night, old man. I enjoyed myself so much."

XXXI

Max dreamt he was at Helen's rehearsal at the Queen's Hall. He sat alone in the empty auditorium in the middle of the fifteenth row. At the end of a piece he applauded vociferously. At last Sir Henry Wood was forced to take notice of him. He turned to Max and acknowledged his applause with a grave bow. But Max was implacable. He clapped with his hands and stamped with his feet, till Sir Henry turned to his orchestra and with his two hands lifted 180 executants to their feet, while Max, unappeased, shouted: "Encore! Encore!" At the end of the encore he dashed towards the platform, and his appreciation became riotous—and he awoke. And where was Helen? Visions flooded his brain. A warm night. Open windows. White arms. Slim legs. Her beauty had driven him mad with longing. "By God!" he thought, "unless I have that woman I shall be cheated out of my heaven!"

Next day was a Sunday. Max arrived alone, surrepti-

tiously, in a taxi. On strong wing-beats he flew into her room. He was too ardent to indulge in needless and retarding explanations. A talented woman, she must guess the demon that was in him. And indeed she did guess. Helen drew back aghast and looked at him with horror-stricken eyes, as though he were an *agent provocateur* in a pogrom, had just slain her parents and sisters, remained insatiable, and was now demanding the final toll.

She told him she must have affection first. He must worry about her, feel sad when she felt sad, gay when she felt gay. He must console her when she was down, exult with her when she was up, calm her before concerts, congratulate her thereafter. "Then, then," she said, "one day, perhaps."

Queer, this insensitiveness. She might be telling a starving creature, "We will eat another day." He felt in no mood for being put on probation, and on the whole declined the partnership. If he could not have a thing easily enough to be worth having, he took his leave. *"So,"* he took his hat, *"und damit Gott befohlen!"*

XXXII

Helen was startled. The withdrawal, even more than the onslaught, astonished her. It was too sudden. Had his passion been damped by her tentative refusal? "Sweet Max! He does not write. What can it be? He loves me," she thought.

Max, returned to Tamaris, showed no sign.

I did think [she wrote a week later] he would hold me fast and never let me go again. It will be nice being friends with you, Max. You do see, don't you, that we must *start* that way? I am always with men. I don't care for women. But why do you all hate and distrust my work so much? My friends go to all my concerts and send flowers and cut my picture out of the papers and listen to me play all night, but there is always that jealousy of my work, at least among the young ones. You too—for you said horrid things about my devotion to my Art, which you called mere "ambition." Aren't you *proud* of my extraordinary success all over Europe?

["The woman is dreaming!"]

Oh, if you knew how I work, sometimes eight hours a day, until I nearly fall off the chair. Perfection—all for perfection . . . my Platonic "ladder" with which I lift myself to Eternal Beauty. So you *will* love my work, too, won't you? You see, I am taking it for granted that you will love me as soon as you know me. I am also ambitious for *you,* and want you to do the most marvellous work! Are you working hard, *hard?*

"Her nature," Max reflected, "expresses itself more adequately at the harp." And the woman had a certain form, poise, carriage, which, though it annoyed him by its artificiality, was yet effective.

Next day there was another letter; then a third, a fourth:

I suppose Thomas Hardy and Anatole France and Lord Cornet are the only three who really *did* understand my attitude about my work. You'll nearly always see Lord Cornet at my concerts. He wrote me a wonderful letter after one

the other day; he said, "You are getting a new wonderful light, from within, which illumines your outer beauty." It's glorious to have that written to one by Lord Cornet, isn't it? For a woman couldn't take *him* in. Therefore if I am beautiful from within, how can I be all the horrid things you say I am? Perhaps you didn't mean it. I can't think why I care what you think of me! Heavens! what a sensation the two of us will make together. One so fair, one so dark, both ["both" inserted as an afterthought] young and beautiful and famous. If you give a party I will play for you!

Again:

I feel you ought to know that as I waited for a letter from you yesterday, my dying dog lay in my arms—and he died at three o'clock this morning. I really asked you to wire to me yesterday because I thought you had a kindly feeling for me and might comfort me a little. This is to ask you what harm I have ever done you that you should behave to me as you have done ever since you met me? The secret of your atrocious behaviour must be that you love me a little.

The last letter struck a more urgent note:

I have reached the limit of my endurance. That Colonel! I live in terror of the telephone. I can't practise. I am unnerved, shaking, and crying all day, and have but one thought —to get away from that Colonel, away from that Colonel! I must flee at once or I will go out of my mind. Listen, Max, my sweet, I've decided to take advantage of your standing invitation and join you all at Tamaris. The fun we will have! I will wire you from Paris.—*A bientôt,* HELEN.

Max weighed, pondered, agreed it was reasonable and, after a day or two, got the girls to agree with him.

"One wants to hear some music. I am ill for it. It will cheer us all up."

"I am sick of 'Valencia,'" Sheila observed.

"That's the right spirit! You're a generous couple of girls, and I love you!"

Then came the telegram.

Max drove the old horse to the station and covered him with a rug to spare him exposure to ridicule, and went into the station and out on to the platform.

A stuffy spring evening. The sun had long set, but the heat still hung in the air. Twenty minutes of waiting. At last the long Paris train steamed into the little station, and Helen alighted. This meeting was a mistake. He greeted her with a poor simulation of pleasure, but each knew that the other was full of misgiving. Max carried Helen's bags himself, as money was scarce and a porter's tip equalled four eggs from Mme. Pétain's. To spare Helen the shock, he decided to keep the rug on the horse for the present. The station square was illumined by moonlight. Max put Helen's bags into the trap and got in.

"Oh, what a charming horse, Max."

"Ay, charming enough."

Then the long drive home, the lanterns of the trap bobbing through the dark streets of the little seaside town. Presently Helen's nostrils began to dilate. "What's this smell, Max?"

"Only the slaughterhouse."

Now they crossed the tram-lines and drove on the

other side of the canal towards the pig farm and the tanning factory.

"What queer smells!" Helen sniffed the air.

"Ay, queer enough."

Alighting at the gate in the dark, they stumbled on a little boy. It was Loulou. And early next morning Mme. Pétain came to make Helen's acquaintance. Renewed greetings on arrival, mild and wary. "This is the little room where I work. Over there on that cliff lives Bourdet with his beautiful wife. Here is the balcony looking out on to the sea. There the lighthouse described by Paul Morand. This is your room," and so on.

"Very nice. I will put a touch of—well, you know . . . of my individuality into your house, Max. I know exactly what it wants to make it look well."

"Don't bother, please."

When Max, having unharnessed the horse, went upstairs, there were Helen and Phyllis hitting it off with each other, and pleased at it. Helen told funny cockney stories, and Phyllis all but rolled on the floor. Then Phyllis responded with limericks. A competition set in.

"There once was a Lady of Brest
Who was very greatly obsessed——"

"Ha! ha! ha! But have you heard this?

There was a man of Malaver
Who palaver.
He . . . . . .
. . . . . ."

"Ha! ha! ha!"

Sheila sat on the carpet and punctuated the fun with circumspect laughter. She followed Max into his bedroom. "But, my dear, she has a face exactly like a pekingese." Sheila wrinkled her face and imitated Helen's expression. When Max said that Helen had a fine figure, Sheila suddenly slapped Max's face, apparently deeming it a fit and proper thing to do, in the best romantic tradition. "I am bored," she said. "You all bore me."

When Max asked Helen what she thought of Phyllis, Helen said she would educate her. And when Phyllis demurred at Helen's arrival Max said: "I don't believe in Dawnism; but I believe the least one human being can do for another is to be kind; that is my idea. What a life she's had at the hands of that Colonel!"

But his sense of impending sacrifice evoked self-pity. "I am a poor man. Don't expect me to buy you clothes and things, what?" he said apropos of nothing.

Helen looked up at him. "I certainly don't. Men who dress you expect to undress you. Ha! Ha! Ha! I give you that for a book."

"And don't you?"

"What?"

"Expect me to?"

She bent her head on one side. "I am too young."

Phyllis and Sheila exchanged glances.

At supper Helen already made herself the little baby girl, though she was conspicuously the eldest of the

three. "When I was six," she said with a look of tender beatitude as if she were cherishing the image, "I sat on Rubenstein's knee."

"And have never got off it!" Max thought. "That's her undoing. At six—yes. But at thirty—less pleasing. . . ." Yet there she was. She called herself "Little Sonia" and talked baby talk. "When Victor first met me, he said, 'Who can you be, poor little you?'"

"And how's Victor?" asked Phyllis.

"Oh, jealous, madly jealous, of course, at Max's taking me away from him. You know, I'm his little girl."

Phyllis winced. "Do you remember, Max, how Victor broke down when I left him for you?"

"How I envy him!" sighed Max.

"He's a darling," said Helen, "and *so* in love with me."

XXXIII

That was the annoying thing about Helen. She only toyed with the idea of seduction. Max had come in to show her her bedroom and lingered uncertainly in the room. She stood like a statue in postures of past heroines, as if to imply, "You have not had a woman like me." He thought of Zola, he thought of Dumas, of Balzac, of Maupassant. "I suppose," he said to himself, "I had better take her to my heart now, warm her through. It is obvious why she has arrived. She loves me."

But he had yet to discover that Helen arrived because she thought that he loved her and could not do without her.

He went up to her and took her in his arms. But when he made amateur efforts to remove her blouse she looked at him wide-eyed, with that expression of being aghast to which the eyebrows *à la* George Robey contributed a Grand Guignol expression. "I am too young," she said.

Max looked at his own haggard face in the looking-glass, at the grey temples, at the puff-bags under his eyes, and said: "I, too, am too young, I suppose."

But she did not catch the sarcasm in his intonation. "Yes," she said, "you and I, Max, have all our lives in front of us. We must not squander away"—she held out her hands in dramatic appeal—"the gift of our splendid, wonderful youth!"

"Good night," he said. "Good night."

Next morning Helen, full of Coty perfumery which she had bought in Paris, was up early and making much of the children. Ben was not impressed, and walked away.

"Why don't you go and talk to Auntie Helen?" Phyllis said.

"I don't like her," he said, wrinkling his nose.

"Why not?" said Sheila.

"'Cos s'e smells."

But Pam crawled on Helen's lap and put her arms

round her neck. "Auntie Helen," she said, "come and give me the presents now, please."

Helen made good her omission by buying lots of toys for Pam and Ben at the Dames de France in Toulon. As she gave them to Pam one after another Pam kept exclaiming: "Ah——! Ah——!" And Helen was equally nice to the Rodéric children and favoured Marcel who, in return, was full of good advice: "You shouldn't drink raw milk; you should boil it," he said. "The cows are apt to be consumptive."

XXXIV

And again it was summer. Helen said she liked the heat and showed no sign of wanting to return to England.

"Don't you wish you were back in your flat, Helen?" Phyllis asked.

"Too much responsibility at my age."

"How old are you, Helen?" asked Sheila.

Helen did not reply.

Questioned about her plans, she said summer was a bad time for concerts; people preferred to sit out in the open air. In moments of depression she wished she had never taken up so hopeless an instrument as the harp, entailing so hazardous a life for a young girl. But the very next moment she spoke of her "extraordinary success all over Europe," and weren't they all proud of her? She had had the old Rodéric piano tuned

and the pedal repaired at her own expense—to spare her own ears, she explained, and she bribed the elder Rodéric boy with cigarettes and sweets that he might abstain from playing. For hours at a stretch she sat on the red-tiled terrace over the harp, practising five-finger exercises, and Emile, pottering about the garden with a shovel, would wink in the direction of the music and say significantly: "H'm! *Je comprends.*"

Max noticed that Helen's devotion to him was on the increase, while that of Phyllis and Sheila also seemed to rise with it. He had ridden up one afternoon on the back of the old horse and saw that Helen gazed at him admiringly. She confessed that the sight of him on horseback and herself welcoming him from the flower-bespangled balcony was a rare romance of a kind which she had hitherto only dreamed about or read in books. Little did she know that he posed before her balcony because he was powerless, poor rider that he was, to make the old crock of a horse obey his wish to go beyond it.

"Sir Max," he said, "on his fiery steed!"

The Captain, looking on from his own balcony, remarked casually that Horse had told him he would have new teeth inserted in the horse and sell him as a young one. Thereafter, addressing himself to Helen, he gallantly enquired whether Madame Saphir was a horsewoman, and being told she wasn't a strong enough girl for it, he said, "The lady should eat a lot of *bouillabaisse.*"

"I am not a lady," Helen said.

And Sheila added, "I know. You are only a little child, a teeny weeny little child, aren't you, Helen?"

Helen did not deign to reply.

But when, in a loud chorus, they trotted down to the seashore, she tried to charm the Captain with her conversation, and, thus encouraged, he pinched Helen in the water: *"Tiens!* It seems Englishwomen aren't all flat-breasted, *hein!"*

"But I am Oriental; I've no English blood in me," she replied.

Helen always talked of "My race," "We Jews," "Children of the Ghetto"—apparently running herself down. When, instead of reassuring her in her self-esteem, Max's look contributed nothing but mute, tactful commiseration (which her tone he thought invited), she swung round: "I am proud of being a Jewess! When your ancestors prowled about the northern forests in furs, mine——"

"Making a virtue of a necessity," he thought.

The three women demonstrated that it is possible, at least for three *English*women (though it may not be so possible for three Spanish or Italian women) to live together with one man. Max admired them for it. Examining the situation more closely, Max perceived that the motive in each case was vanity:—vanity which prevented each of the three girls from admitting, as jealousy of one another would have done, that they clung to Max, whereas their vanity, indeed their very

jealousy of one another, was out to prove that it was Max who clung to her alone. Such vanity which raised jealousy to a plane of restrained and dignified behaviour deserved the name of pride. It spoke well of England. It recalled the pride that had made the country great. What was pride but vanity applied to a moral end?

Helen, nevertheless, had the disastrous habit of pretending to live up to an ideal of herself. The secret of having a personality, Max explained, lay in not knowing it. She did not seem to know that no human has ever appeared to another as he appears to himself. She did not know that if you enjoyed the spectacle of your "personality" as conceived by yourself, you may be sure that others detest it; nor that the charm your personality may exude cannot in the nature of things delight you, since you are not aware of it, and that at most you may have an indication of it in the eagerness with which your company is sought or shunned. She said hers was sought; hence her personality must be pleasing.

How he envied Victor—and Goethe who liquidated most of his love affairs before they developed. If he, Max, was like Shakespeare, he paid dearly for the honour. How disappointing it had all proved to be! Day followed day. He looked with eyes of bleak dismay into the void of her soul and wondered what it was that filled its dreary walls, forgetting that his

own was only filled with anguish. This depending entirely on his love, this devotion to him, disconcerted him. It was as if his soul were a room and some one was looking into it, but he was standing there looking out through another window.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Sowing of Seed

Ich sage Fraun; denn ein für allemal
Denk' ich die Schönen im Plural.

—FAUST.

XXXV

AND there was that other outstanding matter—the horse. The Captain had tried kindness on Horse, with no better result than that Horse had made promises which he had not carried out. How was it that he, Max, was not equal to dealing with so crude a fellow as Horse? An explanation occurred to him. It was because he, Max, could not muster up moral indignation enough to overcome the petty trickeries of his opponent. He could, if need be, lash himself up to lead a crusade against horse-dealers. But a crusade would have been in excess of the importance of Horse, not to say of the value of the horse.

Nevertheless, this matter had been pending too long and it irritated him. Useless to rely on the Captain;

he must go there himself and settle it one way or the other.

In a bar frequented by horse-dealers he found Horse, and argued the life out of him. But Horse was used to arguing, enjoyed it exceedingly, called on all the other horse-dealers present to bear him out in his statements, and, moreover, denied that the grey horse was either exceptionally old or exceptionally worthless. And since the discussion took place in a bar, Horse treated Max to a drink which he thought must make up for any defects in the horse. The long and short of it was that Horse said he couldn't change the horse, but he would give Max a rug to cover him with. They argued till closing-time, after which Horse personally conducted Max across the street to a hotel and commended him to the reception clerk as "My friend Monsieur Max."

Next morning Max called on the Captain and Mme. Bernard, who had an apartment in the barracks, and complained bitterly about Horse. "If he won't change the horse, why doesn't he give me back my Zaza?"

"Let's go and speak gently to him," the Captain advised, "and see what he says."

They found Horse loitering outside the same pub. Though it was quite early, he was already in his cups. "I've come," said Max, "to reclaim my Zaza."

"I've killed him," said Horse.

The Captain looked a little confused. "Why do you

say that?" he said, gently. "I saw him myself the day before yesterday."

"I killed him yesterday," answered Horse.

The Captain took Max aside. "Horse is not in an amiable mood at present. I will approach him another time. Come and have lunch."

Max had lunch with the Captain, who was attended by Chinese orderlies conscripted in Indo-China and deploring their fate. One of the orderlies was said to be a professor in his own country, and indeed he looked studious. Max was treated to quantities of shrimps, snails, cockles, and mussels; there was *bouillabaisse, cochon sauvage* to follow, *apéritifs,* liqueurs; and throughout a generous supply of red wine; after which meal Max took his leave, assured by the Captain that he would leave no stone unturned to induce Horse to carry out his bargain. But as Horse was said to be bankrupt and would yield nothing if pressed, the Captain advised getting on the right side of him by humouring him, standing him drinks, and so on.

"Do what you can. I've done with him!"

Rather than return at once to Tamaris, Max thought he would run down to Antibes on the chance of seeing Yvette. The sun illumined the landscape and lured him ahead. The train, bound for the fashionable Riviera coast, bore him to these gay and elegant felicities, and the studious Chink and barbarous Captain with his wife and *cochon sauvage,* and the tricky Horse, and everything he could not deal with easily and adequately

was left behind. And thank God! Presently the sea-coast on his right and the landscape on his left darkened; the lights were turned on, the curtains drawn, but the train still traced that famous coast line along which you travel as you might from Edinburgh to London for a succession of dreary hours, though still by the edge of the sea. And in this train designed for pleasure-seeking passengers en route for Nice and Cannes there also travelled local business men to whom the gold-hued coast was the too-familiar scene of daily toil and who dreamed of other places for their holidays; and a wind had lashed the sea into rebellion and dashed the rain against the closed and curtained windows, and the train was late and the local passengers pulled out their watches and frowned at the thought that their families were holding up their suppers for them. And Max's heart gave a sag at the thought that tonight there was no hearth to welcome him, that on arrival at Juan-les-Pins he would have, in the slush and the dark, to set out by cab, or on foot, to find Yvette's mother's *pension,* that Yvette may long have left for Paris, and this travelling which made him yawn might hold nothing better at the end of it than a solitary night in a strange bed. This trip to Juan-les-Pins was likely to be productive of as little as his excursion to Fréjus to interview the horse-dealer. The journeys hither and thither were conceived, he realized, to pacify himself on this or that point: that he could not be swindled with impunity by a French

maquignon; and that he would not face the reproaches of his old age for having wilfully ignored the opportunity of possessing a lovely girl who promised so much ecstasy and lived but three hours from Fréjus. He was tortured thus by what were mere ideas, dragged against his inclination, against his better sense, hither and thither, made miserable now by the thought of being made miserable afterwards in default. And it was all the work of his brain, his subversive, mischievous brain. These journeys, these plans of his brain, had never come to fruition, never attained their own ends, but they had, in forcing him to step out into the world, carried in their trail a host of impressions, a whirl of sensations which fed him and proved to be his real life. And thus no doubt it would be now.

After St. Raphael he began to read the names of the stations. Boulouris-sur-mer. Agay. Le Trayas. Theoule. Mandelieu-la-Napoul. Cannes-la-Bocca. Cannes. Golfe-Juan-Vallauris. Juan-les-Pins. Driving along the beach to the *pension,* he thought of Yvette's body that had been wet in the sea and dried in the sun and the sand all summer, and thirsted for it on this wet and thirsty night. It was a chill autumn evening and the sea, like some huge black tiger, sprang and raged at the coast, tearing at it with its white claws. The rain had stopped, but the clouds hung heavy and ominous.

And as often happens when you have embraced disappointment, and fate agreeably surprises you out of sheer love of contrariness, sure enough there was

Yvette, pleased and charming, and there was a seat for him at her side at the joint table with the fat priest and the Swiss lodgers, and Yvette's mother trying her best to keep up a general conversation. After dinner they went to the Casino and thence to Antibes, and afterwards drove back in an open victoria. The sea roared, the wind beat in their faces, the sky drizzled, but Yvette did not want to go home, having told him of a recent episode with a German lodger ejected in ignominy by her mother, who had surprised them together and thought his crime the blacker because she was a patriot and he a German, who in expiation of his crime of deflowering a budding rose foolishly had sent her a bouquet of gardenias. No, she would not risk going home. And so they walked and walked on the beach, up the road, through the pine woods, and the wind from the sea drove the wet air against their faces, and the trees whispered secretively and they felt cool silver rain drops splash on them in the dark as they brushed beneath the branches.

And beyond the wood up on the hill loomed the graveyard. The sea roared unremittingly. Under the rainy moon stretched the blanched stones of the graveyard. Underneath, worldlings who had read the last page of the story slept unheeding the onrush of ages. And these had been men and women whose limbs had thirsted for the tortuous embrace, who had loved passionately, and were no more. And so he, too, would be no more, and in this soaking ground under the

rainy moon he would be bid to lie thirsty. Go to bed thirsty? Yes, if he may drink in the morning. "No need, there is no morning, for you will sleep and never wake." What! Tricked out of the fruits of life, told to lie still in death, a nuisance to nobody. He felt rebellious. He would protest, cry aloud that . . . that he would not do that, he would not agree to do that. . . . Agree? Where was the reasonable power he could reason with?

"Come," he said, "it is drier there on the sloping stones."

They walked up, Yvette leaning her lovely weight against him.

"Here?" she asked.

"Why not? Where else?"

"Very well, then."

And as he saw the tombstones bleached by the rainy moon he thought not of it as a desecration of the pious bones that lay beneath, whose spirit had long reached an understanding by which it would be strange not to forgive an erring brother still doomed to walk the earth; but if, as seemed more likely, this was the end of us and tomorrow, obedient, we shall step into our graves, then it was right, then it was proper that on this stone and in the hearing of the dead he plucked delight from a girl whom fate had thrown in his path, so that the world may live when he was dead, and with whom he was to take from time a little more

than time will yield, before this body, too, is bones under a stone beneath the bleaching moon.

XXXVI

He spent a cold, uncomfortable night on a hard bed, under a thin blanket, and next morning heard Yvette's voice in the corridor. On the breakfast tray was a letter from Helen.

Worthless old precious [she wrote]. I was glad to give you spiritual comfort with my music last night—but one does like to be appreciated as a pretty one of the species and not as a grandmother, as you said the other day. You suck my music and my laughter, as if you were an insect at a flower. I am indeed your honey-pot. I suppose the real inside *you* clings to me—but the other things will be too strong for me and you, so go away while there is yet time, before I become too dear to you . . .

"Oh God! Oh God!" he groaned.

Or shall I come to you to Juan? Shall we snatch at it? Music, car, food, dance. My perfume is called "Sweet Max." Lord Cornet wrote to me this morning. He says I have childish shoulders; he says my body hasn't changed since I was sixteen. I am his baby.

Her shoulders were all right; her body was all right. But why did it no longer interest him?

I like the heroine of your book. But that's because she reminds me of myself at sixteen. She has such "biff" about her.

A vital person. But I think your next book is going to be your best. Things have been happening to you since I came to Tamaris.

Suddenly he felt he was becoming a woman-hater. He hated Helen, hated Yvette, who insinuated that she had no pocket money and also wanted him to take her to Paris and keep her in funds. He had had enough of women and intimated his departure after lunch.

An unusually heavy bill! Running down the items, he cast a recriminating glance at Yvette, remembered —and said no more. The mother had pulled open the drawer of her desk to hand back the change and affix a stamp on the bill, and Max took his departure as one who does not want to make any bother but nevertheless is not satisfied.

XXXVII

Back home, with the figs and the horse and Emile and the Captain. Back with his three girls to a life of prose after what now seemed a fugitive romance, brief, poetic, and, alas, out of reach. . . .

The days shuffled by uneventfully, shortening the span of one's life. Nothing happened.

But one day when Monsieur Rodéric, accompanied by Marcel, came in to see about constructing a garage on Max's ground, he cast an eagle's eye round the premises and said, "You have extensive grounds here

which could be used for cultivation at a profit." This led on to the topic of farming in Algeria. Monsieur Rodéric put the idea into their heads of going to live there. He was not averse to doing so himself, but suggested that Max, who had a smaller family and larger means of sustenance, go first and reconnoitre for him. Under favourable conditions they might all join forces and either cultivate the land or breed cattle, or do both. Marcel was very enthusiastic. His bright eyes aglow with excitement, he came out with extravagant plans about steam rollers, grass-mowers, etc. Monsieur Rodéric was hopeful if less sanguine. "Now these are tiny hands," he said as he took his little daughter's into his own, "nevertheless they are a pair of hands; they can look after the fowls."

The little girl simpered with shy pleasure. She was a little girl and she was put to bed with the hens, and that night she lay awake, dreaming.

"Yes, yes!" cried Marcel. "And cows and bulls. We could have bullfights. It pays," he added, hastily, when his father gave him a look which implied that he was talking rubbish. "All the rich sheikhs would come with their wives. They have several wives, you know, over there. And we could charge admission like they do in a circus—two francs a head." And he looked round triumphantly.

And Marcel, too, lay awake in the night, dreaming of wild long-maned horses and fierce sheikhs, and

himself contriving to save a seemingly hopeless situation to the admiration of his family.

XXXVIII

The Captain said he didn't mind their going, provided they paid eighteen months' rent in advance to cover the lease, or secured a new tenant. "Go we must!" Sheila cried. "If you don't, Max, I will, alone."

"Do," Helen said.

"After you," replied Sheila.

"I'm sure," Helen said, "this girl is staying out of sheer cussedness. She doesn't care two pins about you, Max."

"I'm your one legitimate love, Max, aren't I?" said Sheila. "The other two are afterthoughts."

"You ought to be with your guardian. I can't think how he allows you to stay away all this time," Phyllis observed.

"Don't be absurd! Since I left school, because he didn't pay the fees, and got employment on my own, Cæsar's lost his hold on me."

"Still, I don't see that Algeria is a very safe place for a girl with your morals," said Helen. "As you admit yourself you don't care for Max, why come at all with us?"

"Because I want to go to the desert. I'm curious."

"So am I," said Max. The idea of farming in Algeria

obsessed him. It was a dream, a heaven looming in the distance. "I imagine it as going back to nature, leading a life *à la* D. H. Lawrence."

"I don't think Helen will find it very congenial," said Phyllis. "I can't think why she wants to go."

"Because she's got too many engagements for concerts 'all over Europe.' Because they're all dying to hear her bally harp, that's why," said Sheila.

Helen tossed back her head spectacularly. "I am primitive, spiritual, elemental! The desert is calling me!"

"Anyway," said Max, "I am highly honoured by your staying on with me—I mean all of you. I can't tell you how I look forward to the change."

Accordingly, they advertised their little house for disposal. A very nice elderly gentleman in a velvet jacket and gaiters appeared one bright autumn morning on a bicycle, from nowhere, and secured the little house on the spot by paying down a deposit. He found, however, that his furniture would not fit into the cubicles, which caused Sheila to say: "It's absurd! I mean these Frenchmen have much too much furniture," and before another day was up a man on a bicycle was seen pedalling up the little lane, followed by a man in a car—and the villa changed hands again. Before leaving, Max had arranged with the Captain that he take the old horse and trap to Fréjus with him and try his best to dispose of them; and together with

Emile, Max drove the old horse to the station, he hoped, for the last time.

A day was fixed for their departure, and sure enough the day came round when all the trunks were packed and time hung on their hands. Max strode up and down the road, thinking, and suddenly Loulou bobbed up out of the dark, shrank back, and vanished in the gloom. And here was the Rodéric gate. Had he better go in now and say good-bye? Max rang. No reply. And when afterwards, laden with luggage, they all slouched past the Rodéric house to the station, they caught strains of the Rodéric youth playing assiduously hymns on the piano, waiting for the Lord, who had planted him on this earth to deliver him from it. Mme. Rodéric, who again was "expecting," came out to greet them. "I came to your door, but no one was in," Max explained.

"I know."

"How?"

"Loulou told me he saw you come."

Then they were in the train on the way to Marseilles. Max looked out of the window and dreamed. In his pocketbook he had a snapshot given to him last summer on the beach of Juan-les-Pins. *"A Max de la part de sa petite Lysette,"* read the inscription. The sweetness of it! They must excuse him if he looked at it again. . . . How sweet! How fine! How true! How tender! . . . She'd written she was at Marseilles for a few days, and he was going to put up at her hotel. It

seemed romantic. The three women with him, who smiled at him when he produced the snapshot, were identified with passports, hat boxes, discomfort, and expense.

Marseilles. The smell of the sea, the disorder of the quay, the casual joy of a warm evening diffused over the seaport—Lysette with her seductive legs would henceforth recall these scents and lights, and by those tones and hues she too would step alive into his memory. And now she was the curtain behind which this visible reality trembled on the brink of revelation.

He met her in the lounge. She looked out at the harbour and laughed. A woman, a donkey, a motor-car passed—she laughed. "Look!" she laughed, girlishly, without cause.

"How charming!" thought Max. She recalled *Les Malheurs de Sophie,* girls' schools, fun in the convents. The poetry of life! He was tapping it, washing his hands in a cold mountain brook. Life!

He frowned when Phyllis emerged from the corridor. This harem! "Can't I be left alone for a minute?"

"I want some money," she said, "for Pam's outfit."

"Life!" he said. "Life all over!"

XXXIX

In the evening, after they had dined at a *brasserie,* Lysette's mother again had an attack of asthma. So

tiresome! In the street she had to resort to a flask and breathe in heftily to recover her poise. Max found his room was next to Lysette's. During the night they leaned out of their windows and exchanged comments. Max left his door open. "If she wants me," he thought, "she can enter."

Then sitting on his bed, inhaling the mild moist air of Marseilles, reading the usual hotel notices concerning the irresponsibility of the management as to valuables left in the bedrooms, he waited. He read: *"Prière de bien vouloir veiller à la fermeture des robinets du lavabo après usage." "Veiller,"* indeed! Did they expect him to keep vigil over the taps! He had better things to sit up for. . . . She did not want him. At least, she did not enter.

But in the morning she slipped into his room and gave him a virgin kiss. He clung to her, to prolong the ecstasy, and she closed her eyes as if to take it in, hold it there for a keepsake.

"Allez! allez!" she said.

As he went he was conscious that she might be looking at him through the window. He wondered whether he cut a better figure in his hat or without, decided for without, and carried his hat in his hand.

He was content with life, and on board he ordered wine for his harem as an expression of that contentment. What fine, loyal girls they were, each unique, each distinguished. "Full of qualities, full of qualities,"

he mumbled as a passenger, thinking the wine was included in the fare, asked him to pass the bottle to him. "Let him drink; I don't mind," he thought. "He seems a nice chirpy ponce—and so am I, letting him drink my wine, damn him!"

The nose of the boat began to circle round.

"We are off!"

Churning of waters. Smell of tar and secreted fish. Shrill hoots. "Good God! Is that necessary? Can't ships moderate their gesture? They will, I assure them, lose nothing by it in dignity and weight." The captain, to whom this question was addressed in imperfect French, showed no sign of understanding the quality of the humour. "Poor mutt!" Max thought. "Poor ponce!" The captain, moreover, was the first to leave the table when they began to pitch. He got up at a bad lurch, when a bottle rolled over, as if to remonstrate with the man at the wheel; but in truth he did not come back. At dinner he got up after the soup, looking serious. "I've poisoned my stomach," he said—and was not seen again. Helen and Phyllis sat on either side of his empty chair. Then all the three chairs were empty. Then all but three chairs were empty. Next, Sheila also stayed away, and there remained only Max and a French colonel. Then Max failed to come up, and so could not say whether the colonel had kept it up to the last.

Next morning the sea was more sensible; it grew more and more reasonable till no fault could be found

with it. They felt a very marked difference in the air—Africa stretching her arm across. How warm. The passengers strolled on deck. The captain kept out of sight. Not till the coast of Algeria insinuated itself across the horizon did Max discover that the French colonel who talked to him about Moslem life was a congenial companion. One never really got interested in people in a foreign hotel or on a liner till it was time to part. And of what use was correspondence? At the end of lunch, when the passengers were going down to their cabins to prepare their luggage, the colonel, puffing at a cigarette, came up to Max and said:

"An excellent meal. The Transatlantic Steamship Company knows how to cater. But the old Romans understood these things better. Their feasts were adapted to complete relaxation. We moderns are timid, we are subdued by our wives. The ancients thoroughly understood the business. With them coffee and liqueurs were not the end. Their banquets were marvels of foresight. They lacked nothing that was essential to man. At the end there were slave-girls . . . virgins . . . opportunities . . . the right finishing touch. Lords of life! Our own position today in regard to woman is invidious. Among the Arabs alone man's domination is still unchallenged. Why, if a Moor's wife happens to pass in front of him it's sufficient ground for divorce. The Arabs are right. A man there will never admit

himself to be in the wrong, for fear it may turn a woman's head. Rather than do so he will punish her for a fault of his own. An Arab sheikh in Algiers once told me that even if he found he was in the wrong he gave his wife a good hiding and then let her kiss his hand and beg his forgiveness and lower her lashes as a sign of submission. 'It keeps them in good order,' he said. 'So much so that when my wives hear my voice from afar they tremble all over!' And, of course, the Arabs are right." The colonel puffed hungrily at his cigarette and looked musingly in the direction of Africa. "My dream has always been to live the life of an Arab. Buy yourself a little Arab house with a courtyard in the middle and a fountain in the courtyard. Take unto yourself four wives, and lie all day on the divan, smoking a pipe."

"Yes, that appeals to me," said Max.

"What a life for a poet or a philosopher! If we had the courage to break with the present, to undo the knot which binds us down, to escape from these bitter entanglements!" The colonel braced his shoulders and walked up and down determinedly. "I will do it yet," he said, hoarsely. "I don't fit into my life. I am an Arab at heart. Between you and me, I hope to leave my wife at the base and wander off into the desert alone and live the life of a native. And I am not the first. Many a Frenchman out there has settled down to the native life. Ah!" He rubbed his hands anticipatingly.

"Peace. Comfort. Strong desires. Dusky love. Native beauties. Arabian nights."

"Anatole!" came a wry, hissing voice from the hatch round the corner. The colonel turned round and faced his wife, tall, thin, elderly, apparently indignant.

"Anatole!" she commanded. "Go and bestir yourself about the luggage! Don't leave it all to me again, do you hear? Anatole!"

"Go to hell!" he said, meekly.

"Imbécile!" she shrieked, piercingly, and stamped her foot. "Will you do as you're told?"

He turned to Max with a wry smile, looking sheepish. "The Arabs are right," and he went.

Meanwhile the coast had projected forward to meet them, the landscape had crystallized itself, the streets and houses had come into focus; and as the afternoon wore on they saw the town, like a Christmas tree lit up in daylight, prepare itself for the falling dusk. Still the engines throbbed impassively and still the coast came nearer to meet them, and then grew blue with dusk, and there were all the lights of Algiers, aglow, quivering. "Look! Look!" this or that experienced traveller would say, and he would point out Mustapha Supérieur, the Casbah, the Jardin d'Essai, the Great Mosque. Then there were hoots, a tug at work like a small sheep dog propelling a stray brainless lout of a sheep into righteous ways. The clumsy thing they were on was alongside a floating pier, at last. Max and his women came down the gangplank and at once

found themselves in the midst of a gibbering, gesticulating Oriental canaille.

XL

What wearied in Algiers was the pertinacity of the shoe-polishing urchins. If you sat down in a café or only slackened your pace, one of these numerous urchins had already got hold of your feet and was polishing them. A display of feet, however casual, they interpreted as an invitation. Now and then an angry waiter kicked a boy with his polishing tackle out of the door of the café, and the boy returned through another. One day Max saw a car, having exhausted its supply of petrol, come to a halt on the boulevard, in the natural order of physical things. At once a bevy of boys with shoe-polishing boxes ran across to the passengers who sat in the car, concluding that they wanted their shoes polished.

One boy after another had laid his shoe-polishing box at Max's feet, only to have it kicked away again and again. There was nothing for it but to move more rapidly, look away vacantly as if unaware of their phenomenal aspect. Max strode out, looking stern, full of purpose. But a clear-eyed urchin ran after him, circled round him, tugged at his sleeve and insisted on conducting Max to the "Chat Noir." "They're all *Parisiennes* there and they do everything."

"One has hardly come to Algiers to meet *Parisiennes,*" Max demurred sourly.

"If monsieur wants Arab girls, I take him to other place."

"Well," said Max, turning to his companions, "it must be instructive to see, what? A touch of native life. Make the most of one's travels. Live and learn, and above all, never say die!" They gave him leave in different accents, but each of the three insinuating that she did not care what he did, since he clung to her, not she to him. In the native house Max asked the little Arab girl how she got on with the other girls. "Like sisters." He thought of his own harem and their relations. "Like sisters," he said—and laughed noiselessly.

Algiers, however, was not their goal—not a centre of farming, it seemed. They must go further south, into the heart of the desert: maybe beyond. Having visited all the stipulated places of interest, Max, Phyllis, Helen, and Sheila went to a touring agency and booked seats in an auto-car going down to Bou-Saada. While they were there booking their tickets, two American ladies back from the desert trip came in to complain that they had not been shown the sights marked on their auto-trip programme.

"And as we were nearing home," they said, "other American ladies in another auto-car told us we had not seen many things we ought to have seen."

The girl clerk looked melancholy. "What will you?" she said, hunching her shoulders, and gave them pic-

ture post cards of the sights they had missed, to console them.

The two ladies took the picture post cards lamely, looking far from satisfied. "Now we ought to have *seen* these places," they said as they moved reluctantly to the door.

"What will you?" repeated the girl clerk.

The colonel on the boat had put the idea into Max's head to take an Arab house in Bou-Saada; and they were advised to bring a native girl from Algiers. The servant question presented no difficulties in the towns. Max watched the native girls go to market, and when he saw one who appealed to him, "Hullo!" he said. "Going to market?"

"No," she said. "I must go on an errand to Mme. Joubert in the rue d'Isly. I live at number five rue de Constantine. My employers have a motor-car, a gramophone, and a wireless, and are very swell people."

"Wouldn't you like to come to me?"

"Yes, I would."

"How much do you get?"

"I get a hundred and fifty francs a month."

"Well," Max said grandly, "that is very poor pay. I will give you a hundred and sixty."

"Will you really?" she beamed. "Swear on the tomb of your mother."

"I swear I will," he said, "or let Allah blind me on the spot."

And Oda was engaged. To keep up prestige with

Oda, Max the very next day acquired a gramophone and, to please himself, a complete set of records of the Tristan opera. Next morning Max, Phyllis, Helen, Sheila, and Oda set out by auto-car in the early hours and travelled through the gorges to Bou-Saada. The gramophone was put at the back of the auto-car, which provides space for such luggage. Helen's harp was attached by a rope. As the day lengthened the gorges were left far behind, and they were traversing vast plains which gradually turned into dunes, the vegetation becoming more bitter and desolate till all was sand, at first hard and uniform, then more rebellious, the wind having grafted waves like those of the sea. And, to think of it, this dreary desolation they were now traversing once had been the ocean floor! And athwart and across stooped and staggered camels laden with wares. Pam and Ben, tired out by the long journey, sat soberly in the deep seat of the auto-car, their woollen caps pulled over their ears; they looked grave and thoughtful. But, "Look! look!" Pam exclaimed, suddenly. "Camels!" And Ben screamed with joy. When, after hours of travel, dusk was falling around them, they perceived, southwest, a cluster of lights—the oasis of Bou-Saada. Another hour brought them to the gates of the stronghold. Guides and menials of all kinds, jibbering and clamouring, had jumped on the side-boards and clung to them for dear life, claiming precedence over one another. The auto-car drove down

the chief street, depositing its passengers at the various hotels. It was dark, mild, and peaceful. Here they were, then, in this oasis, walled in from the desert without, steeped in palm-trees which swayed, whispering in the breeze.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Bonds of Love

XLI

WHEN, next morning, they passed through the gate of the oasis and stood facing the expanse of sand, Max observed to the company:

"There is no question that the oasis is enchanting. But it is rather on the small side. The desert, on the other hand, is vast. I suppose this is intentional?"

The guide agreed readily. He smiled readily, showing two rows of excellent teeth.

There was no vegetation, apparently, for miles and miles around. Indeed, if Monsieur Rodéric had meant them seriously to consecrate their labours to agriculture, he had gone wrong in his geography—or they in theirs. "But not a potato anywhere!" said Max.

Phyllis was angry. "I told you, Max, to have a good look round first. But no! you must go and get the house. And now we're tied."

"Just like us!" he exclaimed.

"Rather rash, Max, all the same," Sheila pouted her pink mouth.

"However it may be," said Max, "at least no one can say that it is not in keeping with my nature."

"How long have you got it for, Max?"

"Three years."

"We shall die before then," Sheila sighed.

"You can't deny at least the house is lovely," he protested.

"We don't deny it," they replied in chorus.

"And what a dawn! In all my thirty-seven years I have not seen such a dawn. It makes me want to go down on my knees. I can understand now why these men prostrate themselves in prayer."

Indeed, apart from the dawn, there was little left to grip one's fancy, once the initial curiosity had been exhausted. The first day or two they set out on donkeys and dromedaries to the dunes, visited the market place and other stipulated places of interest, including a native house set apart for the purpose, a shop of native wares, and later saw the Ouled Nail girls perform their native dance. This programme, they soon found, could not be enjoyably repeated. Nor did the theme admit of variation. As days grew into weeks, weeks into months, it angered them to see each morning the ghoulishly expectant faces of chic Parisians, curious Americans, glum English, conducted by familiar guides, past the same children begging alms, to the

same market place, the same old native house, then to the one and only shop of native wares; in the afternoon to see them ride out to the same dunes on the same dromedaries; to see them troop at night to witness the same old Ouled Nails perform the same old dance. Why, already by the second week they knew the faces of the camels!

Their house was indeed very lovely. Its four walls enclosed a small courtyard with a playing fountain in the middle, and all the doors and windows opened upon it. It seemed a pity to Max that this Moorish dwelling, designed to keep Eastern women captive, was lived in by three self-willed Western women who would not go away. The walls, indeed, were wasted on them.

Within the first month of their sojourn, Max organized an expedition on horseback ostensibly into the heart of the desert; in actual fact merely some little distance towards it. The sight of this great barren waste was to enrich their hitherto barren impressions of the Orient and to neutralize as far as possible the feeling that they had made fools of themselves in coming to live here. The cavalcade started in single file, with a disproportionately large number of Arab drivers running on either side of them, who did nothing more useful than urge on the horses with a stick and then hold them back again. They rode at a walk, for none of the girls had ever before been on the back of a

horse. Having got only as far as the windmill, with the red gorges around them, they dismounted. Helen's nostrils dilated. "Here, at last, I can feel," she said, "the desert speaking to me; his wild heart throbbing in unison with my own!" Having, a little further, inspected the sand roses—the conventional goal of such an outing—and dusk falling upon them, the Arab drivers proposed to hasten the journey home in a gallop. They accordingly mounted along with the girls, three men to a horse: one in front, two behind, the girl in between; they set to work with their arms and heels, and flew. They galloped away over stones, over ridges and cavities, their white robes flying in the wind. Max followed alone on a white pony which kept it up with the rest. His loins were rubbed raw by the saddle, but the girls enjoyed their mad ride with the "sheikhs"; then spent a day or two getting rid of the fleas.

The excursion had sobered them, exhausted their love of the desert, and now for the most part they liked to stay at home. All day they sat in their little courtyard by the silver fountain and drank orangeade. Outside, a sudden wind would blow clouds of sand over the dunes; the horizon grew blue. But they in their Moorish courtyard sat and waited for the post, for news from home, turning over the leaves of an old *Tatler,* winding up the gramophone—a touch of dear old Europe in the desert home.

XLII

Oda could neither read nor write, which didn't worry them. But she could cook. She could look after Pam and Ben, and enjoyed doing it; and smiled all day long. At night she waited for them, whatever the hour, to make them coffee and take off their shoes, and was up with the lark, washing the floors, bending down from the hips and mopping the tiles in her stride. "So supple these girls," Max would remark, watching her. "One can't but admire them."

"You obviously can't." Phyllis, Helen, and Sheila displayed a remarkable solidarity in objecting to Max's tampering with Oda. Max held that he was lord of the household and, according to the Koran, was entitled to tamper with his female domestics. But the white women objected and Oda was sent back to Algiers.

Their high-handed action in regard to Oda, who had taken to him, embittered him. He had not come East to be bullied by women. "The bonds of love," he said, "are hard to break. Where have I read this line?" He found small delight in their company, which encumbered him, making him want to whizz off round the corner, and he could not understand how one so miserable and divided as he could still hold these three women, who showed no signs of wanting to leave him.

Loneliness had been the cause of all this havoc. It had begun and it ended always the same way. He was lonely, and she was lonely. They met—and were lonely together. So devastatingly lonely that he had but one idea—to flee from this double, this treble, this quadruple loneliness, to separate. And to begin anew.

The force of Helen's reluctance to give herself to Max was about equal to his pressure; neither was great.

"No, Max," she would say, "no. Why spoil an ideal relationship? I want to remain your constant helper and inspirer. I am not like the other two, who are just little . . . I could but I won't say it. I am never catty."

"Well, yes," said Max, glad that his half-hearted efforts had met their match.

Helen would contract her George Robey brows and say, uncertainly, "Besides, I am much too young."

"Youth!" Max mused aloud. "The heyday of youth!"

Then he would see the resistance break in her eyes. He would quickly say: "Ah well, in that case let us have some music."

She would sit down to the harp, pained at her cowardice and indecision, and all that she lacked to make her happy in real life rose to her breast, ran into her arms, into her fingers, and the gilded monster flinched, trembled under her touch. Max leaned down, his elbow on the step, and closed his eyes.

At Tamaris, the elder boy Rodéric, he supposed, still

played hymns, and old Rodéric read sermons. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken us?"

XLIII

Helen would sometimes go away to Laghwat or the rich district of the Mzab and play at the houses of the local potentates; and she would write how Agha Khôdja and Ibrahim-Bey were both in love with her and jealous of each other. But she would hurry back before the end of the week, saying how their rival attentions had exhausted her.

Now that he felt no passion for her, it delighted him to reverse the rôles and say: "Oh, why can't we, two civilized beings, cut out all this sex stuff? It has no appeal to me. It's your music I love, your finer, not your grosser, instincts." And, for the first time in his life, he appreciated the legitimate claims of the one who refuses as against the one who requests.

Indeed, he did not need her except when she was away. One night when they were all away he wanted them. He put on the gramophone, the complete "Tristan" opera, and his thirst was quenched by the beauty of the music, for he heard the same passion in the voices of the man and the woman, the same unrest in the orchestra. "It was the same love," he explained to them afterwards, "the same passion. For what is lust but the secretion, the distilling of this unrest which is our longing to know, to feel creation

at its most tortuous, most exquisite polarities of man and woman?"

"I know," said Helen, eagerly. "'Tristan' made you think of me, of the time when I used to play it to you at my flat, and my being away increased your longing for my beauty, didn't it? Little Sonia understands."

"If you'd get rid of those George Robey brows of yours you'd look better," he said, angrily.

"My God!" She flinched under the lash. "If it hadn't been for that Colonel I would not have left London. Lord Cornet has never got over it."

The vanity of the woman! It seemed to Max, after talking to women, most women, that their vanity was a disease they could not rid themselves of; that when they blamed themselves, analyzed their shortcomings, stripped their souls bare, confessed to a priest, their words were a paraphrase of the same failing—the mental exercise, the result, was again vanity. It seemed to him then that the beauty of women was something accidental, something which existed in spite and not because of what they thought and said and did themselves. Practically all that he admired in them they were not aware of, or had they been they would have condemned, and did in truth condemn, in other women. What parodies they were of human beings! How silly to be tied to them! "'The bonds of love are hard to break.' Damned hard!"

"It's no good trying," Helen sighed. "Max will never

appreciate one. He can't concentrate on one woman, and that's his curse. He goes about all day chanting, *'Ach, Isolde! Isolde! Wie schön bist du!"* really meaning, *"Ach, Isolde! Helene! Brunhilde! Margarete! Wie schön seid ihr!"*

"Stick to English," from Phyllis.

"Stop showing off," from Sheila.

"You understand what I mean, Max," Helen evaded them.

Max shook his head. "Man's unhappiness, as I construe, comes of his greatness: it is because there is an Infinite in him which with all his cunning he cannot quite bury under the Finite. Will the whole Finance Ministers and Upholsterers and Confectioners of modern Europe undertake, in joint-stock company, to make one Shoeblack happy? They cannot accomplish it, above an hour or two; for the Shoeblack also has a Soul quite other than his Stomach. Thus spake Carlyle. And thus speak I."

The three women looked up at him with shy wonder—they who could not accomplish it because Max had a Soul quite other than his Stomach.

XLIV

It had seemed to Max that what he wanted was a simple life in the taste of D. H. Lawrence. He had dreamed of "blood contact" with the Arab, of a *rapprochement* with the nomad race-consciousness,

and acquired fleas at a distance. He had wanted to be the "complete man"; but at the end of a year in the desert he but achieved complete ennui. He now reviled D. H. Lawrence, hated the thought of him and his theories, and vented his contempt for every kind of *Weltverbesserungswahn* on those nearest to him—using them as illustrations of how *not* to live. So at least it seemed to Helen. "D. H. Lawrence!" Max shook his head over his coffee, slowly waking from a state of coma into tepid tedium which enveloped him. "D. H. Lawrence! He is all out for completion, for harmony, for balance and poise. And what poise is there in him? He harps on the same note, distorts himself into contortions in his perpetual wail about being natural, being 'man'—till you get sick of the name. This incessant grumbling, the empty threat: 'I'd like to kick him! I'd like to kill them all!' from a frail unsteady frame. This endless reiteration of fierceness: 'So there was in this empty world room for me and a lion.' Him and a lion! Pals! Birds of a feather. This directness, blood-to-bloodness, bowel-to-bowelness, from a feeble, sickly looking little man. This incessant baiting of generalities, the juxtaposition of everybody else as a machine with himself as the ideal body-to-body lover. 'Mind, you've got to feel with *the whole* of your body'—throb in your little toe—or you're no good. How humourless! And what does it all amount to, his philosophy, I mean, but to a gracious permission for men and women to behave as they would naturally wish to

behave in more auspicious circumstances. No, enough of your D. H. Lawrence! Give me towns, life in a metropolis, trains, and buses. To hell with snakes and plumed serpents and colliers, and above all to hell with Arabs, fleas, overloaded donkeys, shoe-polishing and alms-begging! Give me Paris or New York!"

At the end of such a tirade, Helen would say, "You and I know a few things, Max." She gave a confused little giggle as if in answer to the other girls' appreciation—which, in fact, had not been forthcoming. And Sheila said: "You, Helen, bow *before* the applause. Is that a concert habit?"

Helen did not deign to look at her.

"Similarly," said Max (though switching off on an entirely new track) "with the development of the intellect man began to ask himself: How best am I to get value for my time and effort? With the consequence that he spends time and effort in trying to solve the problem, which perhaps is not the best way of getting value out of time and effort." He cut himself short, because it wasn't really this he wanted to say. Helen at once said: "You and I, Max, understand each other perfectly. That is because we have a love in common—a love of the things of the mind."

Sheila's eyes reflected an ironic light. "Helen, you're an incurable actress . . . off the stage. It's a mistake."

"Thank you. You ought to know, you've lived so long."

"I'm glad I'm not old."

"You're what the Germans call *altklug.*"

"I don't know any German."

"*Altklug.* You know what I mean, Max? We two understand each other, don't we? I always had a partiality for writers. Musicians are a poor lot intellectually. When they don't play they have nothing to say. They sit and play cards. I'm different—ha, ha!"

"Music!" said Max in a voice of entreaty. "Music!"

"Not while this little bitch is about."

"I'd rather hear the gramophone," said Sheila.

Phyllis put on the gramophone, thereby throwing in her lot with Sheila, but to show that her standards were not below Max's appreciation of Helen, she put on "Tristan."

For the same reason Sheila listened attentively.

"Riotous music! Isn't it?" he said.

"What is this palaver, Max?" Sheila asked when Tristan and Isolde, having met in an overflow of joy, denied all personal claim to existence and swore that each was the other.

"They're arguing," said Max. "Isolde wants to get a gold wrist-watch out of Tristan, and Tristan explains that he's broke and asks her to come for a ride with him on his motor-bike instead. But she says in that case she'll go off with old Joe across the road in his two-seater."

Sheila put on that subdued, unconvincing smile of amusement which Max detected in her whenever she had been humiliated. Her criticism as conveyed by the

choice of the word "palaver" was intellectual, and Max had talked as if she had merely been ignorant and suburban. His reply might have been justified to one who had used words like, "What are they jawing about?" But "palaver" was on a different plane. Besides, had she ever asked him for a gold wrist-watch —she who had paid all her own travelling expenses and would have paid for her keep now if she could find time to write to Cæsar to send her a cheque? Was Max perhaps confusing her with Phyllis? "You're unfair, Max. I know as well as you that the music is wonderful. It's the libretto I was laughing at—which is bilge."

"Not so much bilge as you imagine."

"Of course it's bilge. All librettos are bilge."

"I stand corrected."

Sheila giggled prettily but uncertainly.

"Now Isolde is asking for her passage home to Ireland," he explained. He hoped it wasn't a hint, even though a hint might be opportune.

"You're a fool, Max."

"I know. To one of your years and erudition, I must, I confess, seem a fool."

"But you are."

Phyllis looked at Max with a look expressive of what she thought of this chit.

"Here," Max explained, "old Marke blows in and finds Isolde a little unconscious of his presence. She is beside herself, you understand, Tristan just having

given up the ghost, and the dear old man, all sympathy and understanding, sings his little air that—well, he knows the whole thing has been a sad, bad business. But Isolde is past appreciating the dear old man's magnanimity. She is in the past: she is meeting her Tristan beyond the fretful day, united to him in the moment made incarnate, made eternal."

Helen looked up.

"Dean Inge," said Max, "propounds the view that change cannot exist except in relation to the unchanging. 'Religion,' he says, 'always believes that there are an absolute reality and truth, and finds them in God.'"

"I believe it!" Helen said, passionately.

"'To assert ultimate relativity,' he says, 'is to cut the nerve of faith.' To assert ultimate relativity, to go on asserting ultimate relativity, might induce one, I agree, through sheer weariness, to acquiesce in the idea of God. Hence all these hymns: 'Weary, weary . . .'"

"I believe," said Helen, "in fulfilment."

"And I," said Max, "suspect that heaven is an empty restaurant where you arrive having lost your appetite."

But even such a prospect loomed far away from the phenomenal world to which they were tied, even such negative assuagement was pending. Helen sighed. "I should like to go on a long voyage." It was a warm evening. They went and sat on the hot dunes. Stars whispered; and all this sandy waste lay still and listened to God. But they had nothing to talk of except of the life far away from the desert, the life of the

past, the life in the cities, and failing it, even that on the high seas. And they, clustered together, dreamed singly. "Oh, life! Life! Life! Where are you? When are you to begin at last? Perhaps when they have screwed in the last screw of my coffin lid I will open my real eyes, see the curtain stir and rise, and the real life will unfold itself. No! No! No! No good that. No good anything like that. Christ, you have died for me, but I have not been delivered. I am in hell. Amid all this sun and plenty I am starving, my bowels burn, I am in hell."

XLV

As time passed, he noticed how Phyllis's chin had grown more pronounced and protruding; her lips seemed to Max more and more a thin line of impotent anger with him and at the world of God. Helen's lines from nose to mouth marked more determinedly the implacable enmity of the years: her eyes grew more red, more watery: yes! she looked (Sheila was right) more and more like her own pekingese. And even Sheila was getting uncomfortably thin: an accusation, as if he'd somehow, if not in food, perhaps in clothes and amusement, been starving her. And assuredly Max was not getting more beautiful, his face waxing redder and redder. Pam was growing fast and might in due course, Max hoped, be sought after by the local matchmakers as a desirable wife for a rich

sheikh. And Phyllis had visions of sending Ben by and by to Eton, where he would learn to talk like a bird. They were like a group of planets who had revolved separately and round one another, caused and suffered a change: and that change was time. Two winters had thus rolled away.

"I am beginning to be nervous on Pam's account," Phyllis confessed one morning, "with all these Arabs prowling about."

"Don't be absurd!" he said, sharply. "So like a mother," he added in a more mellow tone of voice. He knew there was more than a grain of genuine anxiety in her words; but mostly it was the expression of the kind of vanity which wishes to focus attention on oneself by imagining an impending disaster and inviting others to share with oneself an unreal emotion over an improbable event. Can't she spare him that?

He wondered how it was that not one of them would leave him even for a fortnight. It was really most singular! Must he pass with them through life to the grave? Really odd! What excuse had they, when he came to think of it? Phyllis had definitely thrown in her lot with his when she left Victor; and she had children. Helen he knew would not leave him, because she loved him now and the harp was not a popular instrument, and there was no insistence on her being elsewhere. And Sheila, he supposed, stayed on because she could not be bothered to go anywhere else. He had

been successful enough in retaining them. He could plume himself on that if he liked. He had been too eager not to mistake the shadow for the bone. And it was the tragedy of his success that, lured by the promise of the shadow, he had got away with the bone. And nothing but a bone!

One day in early autumn, to be sure on Helen's birthday, a letter came for Max which, for a time, altered for him the aspect of the phenomenal world. It came at a time when they had no more money (the old money having all gone and no new money having come to replace it). The sub-tenant in the Grosvenor House flat was again in arrears. The letter, which bore a Detroit, U.S.A. postmark, and contained photographs of a young girl of singular beauty, unfolded itself leisurely.

You may not misunderstand my writing you when I tell you it is again Monday in Michigan and that even Sunday in Michigan can be pretty bad. You doubtless dine with the king and queen every day and this is pretty cold mutton, humble pie, and small beer. I have wanted to do various things before writing—to re-read you that I might be sure of what I wanted to say—but that would mean my being re-overcome and re-awed into an admirable refraining. For four years I have considered doing this; so it is not an impulsive but a long-deliberated piece of impudence that meets your inevitably uneager eye—too long, it would have been better done earlier.

It has not been left to me to suggest how magnificent and fine you are. But I have gone to the mat over you and brought you out looking pretty well every time. You see, I read the despised literary journals and saw your picture there and be-

lieved and hoped it to be a good likeness. I contemplated being very solemn here and asking your advice about literary trends and mine particularly. I considered adding laments that I haven't a more fanciful name to sign. Mine is on all the tombstones in Trinity. It might have been Francesca or Deirdre or Berthe or Juliet. However, this is flippant and not at all of the stuff of which my appreciation is made.

It is suggested that I am making a big mistake in not telling here the extent and causes of my approval of you as a man of letters, as a novelist. I retort that an unsolicited communication as this is no place for such a worthy process as that.

At the present the picture I enclose is all I have. Of course, I am mentally already married to you and supplied with an intelligent brood, the current baby in a prosperous lace hat and those further developed equipped with beautiful names and early fostering an urge to deceive us. Children are a problem, I know. But I have learned to let problems go unsolved, for they are always big and I am not indigent. This is not evidence that I am wise or that I think I have a bigger whip than anything; a fortune, for instance. It is rather that I am frightened and lonely and need your sagacity. I have kept out by sheer force the financial and economic aspects because they, despatched from me to you, mean nothing. They would be so fitting, so much in order, so comfortable, ingratiating, and designing that they are not to be endured. Perhaps you will think I am trying to be mainly unusual. But this letter embodies a proposal: I want to be your wife. I am determined because I know I was born for you; and it is necessarily a reconciliation of intelligence and instinct. You will not like it because it is too solemn (we pronounce "Solomon"). But that is honest, for it is like me.

I can think of nothing sadder than wearying you with my garrulousness, particularly now that my devotion is incom-

mensurate. I anointed my hands before beginning to write. What else can I say but that my photographs are a good likeness—and (forgive me) I am richer than you will believe.

If this is boring to you I shall not transfer my allegiance to anyone I can think of.

Honestly and humbly,

COMFORT O'MAERA.

By the same post came a letter, in the most exquisite caligraphy, from Captain Bernard, who said he had cursed Horse again and again and "I can assure you [he wrote] he has not had the last word. I shouted and shouted at him. He won't forget it. I have treated him with contempt." The trap, he regretted to report, so far had found no purchaser. Nevertheless, Max might rest assured that he would see the matter through to the bitter end.

In the dazzling light of the American letter the Captain's wrangle with Horse seemed comic and trite. Even the girls appeared to understand this. In all his literary career Max had only had one other "fan" letter, which had begun: "I am a young chap interested in literature . . ." Miss O'Maera's letter had clearly gone beyond such an interest. The extraordinary beauty of the girl, if one could trust a photograph, confirmed his languid belief in ideal love this side the grave, and in the light of such beauty the letter itself seemed an agreeable blend of would-be erudition and common sense. There it was, a dream about to come true! A new love for him, as exquisite as Isolde's. Fate had seen

to it, as he always knew it would, that he was not to be cheated out of his rights.

He let them read the letter, watching their expressions from the corner of his eye. And he ridiculed without effort their lame attempts to laugh it all away. "Feeble, feeble. And, if you will forgive me, a little unworthy of you." Unworthy—a salutary word to use to women when dealing with their objection to what in fact amounted to a surrender of their worth. He discussed it with them, as he said "sensibly"; but they could see little sense in his plans which did not apparently include them.

"But in the name of reason," Helen exclaimed, "why can't we all become Mohammedans, and then you, Max, can have all the four of us as your wives? Seriously, why not take advantage of the wisdom of this land we live in?"

There was silence. "I'd have to obtain a divorce from my wife," Max said at last.

"Not necessary for a Mohammedan marriage. You would if you were foolish enough to marry your American admirer in the ordinary way. See how my plan simplifies everything."

"She may not want to marry according to the laws of Mohammed," Max objected.

"A girl who writes to you so . . . so wantonly is not likely to refuse you anything. Think of the concerts, Max, I can give, if you go the right way about it. With all this money behind one I shall play where I

like—you know, in all the big capitals, and won't you all be proud of my success! And when I return to the family hearth you will all spoil me, your Little Sonia, beautiful and world-famous! You see, Max, I'm broad-minded." She smiled the little smile which adored itself.

"I'm your first wife, Max?" said Sheila.

Helen sniffed. *"Meinetwegen."*

"I don't know any German."

"I didn't think you did."

Phyllis, who had been sitting with puckered brows, opened her mouth. "If it hadn't been that I could not get my divorce, Max, you would 've married me five years ago, and that would have put an end to all these fancies."

"Come, come," said Sheila. "If it hadn't been that you were married, yourself, Max, you would have married me *six* years ago."

Max's upper lip became rigid, his expression glassy. "As I said before, I don't believe in Dawnism, collective action, and so on, but I do think we should be helpful and kind to one another. I——"

"But what will people think?" Phyllis shrugged her shoulders.

Max looked up quickly:

"Und was die Menschen meinen,
Das ist mir einerlei;
Möchte mich mir selbst vereinen,
Allein wir sind zu zwei."

"I wish you'd stick to English, Max."

"I, on the other hand, must assume my four spouses to be conversant with the chief languages of Europe, if they are to share my heritage to the full."

"Some heritage!" said Phyllis, bitterly. "A suit and an overcoat and two blankets. Shakespeare at least left a bed to his wife."

"I wouldn't have believed, Max," Sheila said, sadly, "you were only out to marry money."

"What d'you think he ran after you for?" Phyllis cried, shrilly. "Your trickster having tricked us all by refusing to kick the bucket in our time, you'd be the last person, one would think, to complain!"

"Hold your libellous tongue!" Sheila snapped. "I won't have her call him a trickster." Suddenly she turned and slapped Phyllis's face.

"You little b——"

"Please! please!" Helen intervened. "Not on my birthday."

"Yes, don't forget, Little Me's birthday."

"Don't you worry! She won't let you forget."

"Now please, please. Max, stop them!"

Helen had prepared a kind of refreshment to celebrate her birthday, which the other two girls consumed without much ado, while Helen looked radiant. She looked round as if to say to her three associates, who were eating away heedlessly at her refreshment: "It's my birthday. I celebrate it."

He was sitting at his table, examining the lovely

photographs, when Helen stole up behind him on tiptoe and covered his eyes with her hands: "Guess! Who is it?" she said in a childish voice. "It's Sonia," she answered as he did not reply. Her cheek against his, she glanced at the exquisite photographs of the American girl. Helen's self-esteem was so tender that her mind automatically transmuted reality, as a nurse distorts or softens the bad news when she brings it to the patient confined upstairs; or the body takes on fat to protect itself in the cold. "Don't you think, darling, I know why you want to do it? You have never in your heart of hearts forgiven yourself for having torn me out, a blazing great plant about to bask in the brilliant sunshine of European success, and brought me——"

Few things, he thought, were more annoying than having to listen to what one knew to be untrue and being unable to expose it; as, for example, hearing an undischarged bankrupt to whom for one reason or another one wished to make oneself agreeable boast of his position in the City. And this was how he felt just now about Helen, for he was eager to enlist her sympathy on behalf of his prospective wife. "But now! now! Don't you remember that you came yourself?"

"Because you could not live without me—but still, it was cruel for me, don't you see, darling," she said with sweet reasonableness, "to be put here on desert

sands? And now your conscience worries you, doesn't it?"

He essayed to murmur dissent, but she wouldn't let him.

"And you are prepared to saddle yourself with a Yankee wife ('Say, I'm vurry glaad to meet you, Mr. Fisher') to make good my self-sacrifice. Isn't that so?" She looked at him with playful sweetness. "Little Sonia may only be a baby, but she understands."

"The others don't seem to."

"Pf! Jealousy! Just like them. I'm *never* jealous because I know I mean to you so much more than these poor little bitches"—she gave a smile indicative that she was not above using a strong word, or at least could carry it off triumphantly—"all put together. Isn't that so?" She smiled at her own charm.

"You say so."

She waited for more. Then laughed her forced laugh. Which, he thought, as he walked away, adored its own sound.

XLVI

Max had taken his hat and, surreptitiously, without telling where or why, had left the house and strolled alone on the dunes, dreaming. A lovely young wife, children, independence. Withal, colossal wealth, it seemed. Freedom and expanse. And love and love!

Returning, he composed a letter to her.

You are very beautiful if your photographs justly reproduce your image; and in the one in which you look less wistful you remind me of my first love. I was fifteen. She looked like that. It was my first and deepest love, strong, passionate, torturous in the extreme, and romantic. And when I look at you now poised on the mantelshelf I can recapture some of that long-forgotten feeling; for she (and you in the picture) are essentially "my type": the kind of oval face and eyes and look that goes to my head—makes me breathe quicker and feel that I am trembling on the verge of incredible well-being. But you cannot be like that, can you? It's too good to be true. My mind toys with the idea what our children will be like, whether they will have brown eyes like yours or blue like mine. If my new book sells like *The Green Hat, If Winter Comes,* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,* rolled into one, and I prove as successful a lecturer as Count Keyserling, I will stop the train at Detroit and, bending down on one knee in knightly fashion on the platform, ask your hand in marriage—the porters and cameramen having been advised of the historic occasion, and you will have more press cuttings for your album. If not, not.

For I cannot conceive married life except *en grande tenue.* A grand staircase of black marble, you understand, lighted by a row of flunkies on either side, immobile, and holding torchlights, like statues. So that when the butler comes up and announces "Il Duce Mussolini" you can say, "Show in the scoundrel!" without a trace of false modesty. But if we are to starve in our barns it would become us better to starve separately.

[Just as well to be clear on this point, he thought.]

Your two photographs are on my mantelshelf, and in between is a picture of a grey kitten tucked away in a big bed

with his head resting on the pillow and one paw over the quilt and looking out at the world with one eye. The picture I picked up in Vienna. And beholding the three images somebody this morning said, "The three cats." All day yesterday tourists came to my abode to examine your portraits. "Yes," I said, "that is the girl, and she will be my wife." There came more and more tourists because those who had already been, seeing your two portraits and that of the cat all in a row on the mantelshelf, concluded that I was having an exhibition of modern and old Italian painting, till at last there was a queue of them shuffling their way to see the pictures, and I stood at the door and said, "Pass along, please!"

XLVII

Max allowed a term of ten days for his letter to reach Comfort. Then, with the exhilarating knowledge that contact had been established at the other end and that her thoughts about him were electrified, he allowed another term of ten days for her answer to reach him. Then he began to count the days nervously. The postman came and went twice a day for five days, bringing him nothing. Had he offended her? Had his reply caused a revulsion of feeling? His insistence on black marble, his reference to Mussolini, perhaps proved unpalatable? Another three days had elapsed. Nothing. He had ceased to wait for the postman, deeming that if he showed visible signs of expecting a letter, the postman, an agent of Fate, might be mysteriously moved to defy him. Max would hide himself out of sight, out of hearing, and yet strain every nerve for

the cherished sound of footsteps, a letter thrust through the letter-box. When the hour for it had irretrievably passed, he would try to persuade himself that delivery had been delayed. The rain had caused the postman to take shelter in one of the hotels. A punctured bicycle tyre. Unduly prolonged conversation on the road to which these southern Frenchmen were prone. Perhaps all the three things at once.

When all these hopes had proved false, he still thought that he might not have heard the postman's steps, or that the latter had omitted (as he sometimes did) to ring his bicycle bell. Indeed, he may have left his bicycle round the corner and slipped a letter noiselessly into the box. The great thing was not to expect anything.

He thought that if he opened the letter-box roughly, with a show of bad temper (as one not expecting any sort of good to come from the present Deity), he might find a letter in it by way of sheer surprise. If Providence was perverse, he, Max, knew how to get round it by pandering to its perversities. How cunning he was!

But God was not to be mocked and apparently in no mood for playfulness.

One morning, indeed, the postman's bell startled him. There was a letter, true enough, but only from Mme. Pétain, dictated by her to her husband, for she was completely illiterate. The Captain, it was rumoured, had sold the horse. Loulou had overheard a

conversation to that effect. She wished them to be apprised of the rumour and wondered whether he had remitted them the money. For the rest there was little news. The Rodérics had come down still more in the world. The stationer's shop had closed down for lack of custom and they now merely lived on their fowls, and Mme. Rodéric was expecting again in October.

Poor mutts! And he, so to speak, rolling in money—prospectively. (If only Comfort would write.)

"I wonder," said Phyllis, "if the Captain has really sold the horse and is keeping it dark."

"What does it matter, with all these millions in the balance, about an old horse!" He snapped his fingers in the air. "He's welcome to it."

A terrific ring at the bell. He dashed out of the house in his bed clothes. A telegram, of course! A telegram from Comfort! Yes, the telegram, of course!

A native boy was muttering something through the chinks of the gate.

"What is it?"

"Do you want to buy any *peaux de lapins?*"

"Allez-vous-en!"

Still no news. Why this gratuitous suffering? He saw a fat old Arab holding a handsome white hen by its legs, no doubt taking it home for his dinner. The hen was to suffer pain and death in order that the grosser appetites of a complacent human being may be satisfactorily appeased and that the Arab's (relatively) higher mental life may continue undisturbed. And it

occurred to Max that his own suffering might be necessary to appease the grosser appetites of some mysterious, refined, superior being who lives in higher altitudes and breathes a rarer air, and by appeasing them conduce to his complacency and after-dinner dreams.

But Phyllis said that killing animals for food was not so bad. "I dare say," rejoined Max, "the hen about to have its throat cut will appreciate the difference. After the matter has been satisfactorily explained to her she will say: 'I understand now. I thought I was being killed for fun, what you call sport. I see now that my life is actually required to provide a good man with a good meal. I spoke in ignorance of the rational end you had in view. Sorry. My mistake.'"

His sarcasm was a veiled insinuation of his displeasure with them. Because his words to them were smooth and veiled, his thoughts were brutal. "It is," he thought, "easier to get a mistress than to get rid of her."

Max strolled about his orchard, sobered by gloom. It was a hot autumn afternoon. Everywhere the trees were heavy with fruit. But the pears as yet were not ripe, except for a little tree at the back of the house, which he had watched from day to day in anticipation of the pleasure he had promised himself. And lo! the pears were gone!

Who could have taken them? Who, indeed? Everything was being taken from him. Everything! Comfort snatched away from him—yes, snatched before his

very eyes. He was sure of it. The old horse apparently sold behind his back! His bride, his horse, his pears. He was destined to be cheated. Evidently it was his fate.

The postman came up to the gate, touched his cap (Max had tipped him last week), and dropped a letter into the box. Still thinking of the missing pears, Max put the key into the letter-box, opened it, and at once perceived Comfort's handwriting on the back of a familiar envelope. He tore it open and read the first lines:

That there was so very little dancing in the streets the day your letter came will always be a puzzle. My sister was telling a Lorelei of it and the Lorelei didn't know, and Daisy said, "It's like getting a letter from Shaw or the Holy Ghost!" But it isn't. There's nothing like it.

He scanned the lines.

How nice you are! How nice your letter! . . . I cannot have you thinking, even for the nonce, that I could be a balm to your unique being. . . . As to our children, if they have my eyes instead of yours I shall put them in dark glasses as soon as they are weaned, out of chagrin.

He scanned further.

. . . no need for you to become a Michael Arlen, since I have millions on my hands. Materially, at any rate, our marriage seems well grounded. . . . I am coming over in the spring.

"That's all right," he thought, pocketing the letter, "but now . . . what of the missing pears?"

CHAPTER NINE

The Harvest

XLVIII

A DAY or so before Max's departure for Monaco to meet Comfort's boat, a telegram came from Victor Thurbon intimating his arrival in Bou-Saada. "He wants me," said Helen, mysteriously. "What are you going to do about it, Max?"

"Nothing at all."

"Why, Max, you are a simpleton! You may be a genius in your writing, but in practice you don't even know how to hold a woman."

"I don't know how to get rid of one, if you want to be accurate."

Helen gave a little twitter of mirth. "You don't, that's quite true." She lowered her voice to a confidential whisper. "Look here, you old pumpkin, why don't you tell them to go? Really, why not, if they are too dumb to jump to it themselves? You've nothing in common with them."

"No." Max's answers now were usually brief, monosyllabic, and consisted of "Yes" or "No" or "Hm" or "That depends." His journey through the gorges back to Algiers now seemed to him a liberation of the spirit, as his trip by the same route three years before from the port to Bou-Saada had seemed an escape from himself. It was fairly cold when he was approaching Algiers. Dusk was falling on the harbour as they passed the outskirts and the Jardin d'Essai. And presently they were driving up the rue de Constantine and depositing their passengers at the various hotels.

Next day Max looked up Oda. A real treasure that girl! His need of her was more than his need of other things. The female form for him was the embodiment, the sunshine of life. When a lovely woman denied her body to him it was as if she had denied him food. And women traded on men's hunger. These white women who, when he cajoled them to yield themselves to him, returned: "I'd rather sit and talk to you; it is your mind I am interested in," could go their white ways and be blessed! It was like being given a newspaper when what you needed was food. They stuck out for furs, pearls, a Rolls-Royce. But Oda understood his need. She was the antithesis of difficulty. She had made no bones about his not wanting to be seen walking by her side through the crowded streets. "Why advertise yourself?" he had said to her, and she agreed, as she always did, that it was undesirable for him to

attract attention, and walked behind him at a distance, while he walked in front, puffing a cigar. How heavy he was getting! She followed him through the crowded native streets till they came to the room which she had hired that very day with the money he had given her. The room was at the top of an Arab house which had been a house of ill fame for generations, and the *dispensaires,* having contracted the habit of visiting it at all hours, simply couldn't leave off, and clients arrived and rang at the bell all the night, though, as Oda said, it was no longer a house of ill fame, but was let to *"des gens honnêtes."* What a body the girl had! He remembered a certain novelist in London who had a post-card picture of an Arab girl, very like Oda, pinned over his desk. The novelist, as he talked of intellectual niceties, looked haggard and dissatisfied with life. His wife was aging, his own health crumbling. And all through his talk Max thought: "Poor mutt! He has social and intellectual gifts. But what he has not is the Arab girl whose picture he has pinned over his desk, and it is with what he hasn't got that he identifies all that is worth having and so feels cheated, cheated out of life, starving among plenty. *'Grau, lieber Freund, ist alle Theorie, und grün des Lebens goldener Baum.'* I, Max, am all for the green tree of life, even if I have to pay for it!"

What a girl! How obedient! And how naïve, when she referred to herself as "Mlle. Odette," and, asked

by him what colour she deemed herself, answered, seriously, *"Café au lait."* The great lusty ape in him which threatened to wreck the nice, civilized cage in which he held him was let loose, was tamed, pacified, and retired into the cage to sleep peacefully like the nice, modest little beast he was. The surging tide which a moment ago had ebbed into black, ominous, heavy seas of desire, parted as if at the approach of Moses and his tribe and rolled back; and Max walked on the dry path towards fields and cities and cultivation to meet Comfort and hope and all that she stood for.

He was out and watching the ships sailing to France. In a few days he would sail. Soon, soon! He twitched his left shoulder. Could it be possible that there were fleas in the Arab house?

"On that other coast I will meet my bride, and she will say to me, 'What have you brought me?' 'Gifts, my beloved, gifts!' 'Gifts?' 'Ay, gifts. Intellectual gifts, and purity enough to last a week.' "

XLIX

It seemed to Max, as he took the boat across to Marseilles, that there was something fatalistic in two individuals like Comfort and himself advancing from a distance of years and miles nearer and nearer, overcoming every obstacle, steering their predestined course, heading straight into each other's arms. And she, too,

was now on the water, nearing Europe from the other side.

At Nice he ordered new clothes and shoes with extra high heels to enhance her first impression of him. And he had resumed the rolling-pin which had lain discarded in a cupboard these two years. In the bathroom there was a full-length mirror. It was some time since Max had surveyed himself in a full-length looking-glass; and the inspection puzzled him a little. Was one like that? Was one really like that? There was a passage in Comfort's last letter which ran: "The picture of you is the nicest picture I have ever seen of anyone or anything. The mouth is soft and beautiful and the eyes are very nice sins." He scrutinized his face in the mirror. Perhaps this was a bad mirror and he did not look like that? Or perhaps he was unduly captious? "There is no question," he thought, "I have changed. But it is human to change. If I were a sea monster—a whale, for example—no one would be struck by the change in me. No one would say to a whale, 'Your change of countenance marks years of suffering and meditation.'" But the figure—disconcerting! As a boy, as an undergraduate, as a young man about town he had received the treatment due to a slender youth, too slight to hold his own with the burly rough-necks who had no feeling for the airs and graces of a boy whose figure was a reed, whose eyes were those of a young doe, and whose complexion girls

might envy. Invariably he had felt himself too young, too pure, too innocent in the company of men of affairs, and to this day, one year removed from forty, he carried this "I am too young" attitude about with him, and was shocked when Sheila had said he was middle-aged. He felt it was a joke in bad taste when she said he was fat. "Keep the fun clean," was his comment—but he meant it. And now beholding this rotundity in the glass, he said, reproachfully, "And to what has nature conducted itself?" He remembered a doctor friend telling him once that a normal stomach was like a rubber hot-water bottle, expanding but little and with real reluctance, without losing its essential shape. A flabby stomach filled itself like a balloon sagging helplessly under its own burden. His own—it was useless to deny it—was a balloon. He gave it an angry punch with his forefinger. "Damn you!" he said. And, indeed, was it his fault? Had he not rolled him up and down with a rolling-pin, pulled him in when he walked, denied him fattening and relaxing food? And to this he had conducted himself! Ah well, it was not his fault. Would Comfort understand that it was not his fault? In a more perfect world one who had done his best would find himself more nobly rewarded. He might tell her that. But would that make her think him beautiful? Hardly. In beauty, as in art, good intentions count for nothing.

In the train he had visions. All had come right of

itself, as all does—or ought to. Things do go wrong of themselves; so why should they not right themselves as miraculously? He had visions of married felicity. Phyllis, Sheila, and Helen had all left him, sincerely feeling that one mustn't overstay one's welcome. This one had got a husband, that an appointment, the third had come into some money unexpectedly. He was free to live his own life with Comfort. And what a life it was! He saw himself as an established and admired man of letters, a sort of Goethe, residing in a palatial house, the recognized doyen of English literature, assisted by an understanding wife, encouraging young talent, proffering advice to the man who wrote "I am a young chap interested in literature," or receiving in audience the man from Fresno, California, to thank him for the gift of figs. "And now," he'll say, "we'll attend a little performance at our private theatre." Through a succession of noble rooms they would conduct their guests along a covered passage, like the Bridge of Sighs, into their private auditorium, to see the curtain rise over one of his own plays. Phyllis or Sheila, who had come on a visit and sat beside him, might take his hand during a sentimental passage and squeeze it gently in the dark: "Do you remember, Max?"—"Yes, yes," wistfully. "But listen to the play."

And now the train was running into Monaco.

The faint wind ruffled his hair. He was in good time. He asked whether the boat would be late. But

he was told that it was on time. And there, indeed, right out of the blue came vigorous columns of smoke rising over the sky line. His heart fluttered within him. Nearer and nearer she came. Happiness! Now he could count the funnels. Now he saw her in three-quarters profile. Now she was puffing and turning, lurching and rolling and fumbling into the harbour. The sea was glorious, the day very pure. The gulls wheeled and cried in long circles above him. Does one live for these moments? But wait, he said, wait! Not so hasty. Oh, his heart. . . .

The liner had moored. The passengers were coming on shore. He looked and caught the smile. The smile familiar to him from her large photograph which he had held in his hands for hours at a stretch to allow that smile to drum its light fingers on his soul. And there it was.

She was like the photograph. She was better. Slim and smiling, with that beautiful dark head poised on a neck more appealing than Helen's, she came down the gangplank. He drew in his stomach and, his heart thumping, went forward to meet her.

His soul failed when she spoke. He had been prepared for flaws, for shortcomings in detail. And there was no flaw, no shortcoming. He could not have believed it. It was . . . unrealistic. That she should have exceeded his hopes! Even her high instep, her ankles, were of the sort to madden him with desire. And she

had that friendliness written in her eyes, her movements, as though they had known each other for years, those long years in which he had been yearning for a being like hers; and here was his harvest, his golden harvest!

L

During lunch he skirted the subject of a Mohammedan marriage. He was nervous. But she asked him about his Arab house. She wanted to see it. She thought it beautiful. "Your being there startles me; it seems to me like being with the Incas."

"It is," he agreed, smilingly. She was delightful!

"I think the Arab life very good for you." Did she indeed understand? A divining soul, it seemed, in a lovely body. Again he broached the subject tentatively. "Speaking candidly ——" No—another time!

"The thought of meeting you at Nice was so beautiful."

"And isn't it?" he asked.

She smiled, looked him over with benevolent interest. "You have nice hands," she said.

He gave a little self-conscious cough, remembered what Sheila had said about his thumb sticking out at a tangent, and pulled it in.

After lunch she went up to her room to rest, and, dazed, stupefied by an excess of wine and happiness,

he too sat down on his bed and glanced mechanically through his mail. There was a letter from Helen:

I remember your being worried that the American girl might not have my long neck—or hair as black.

["Don't worry, she has!"]

It was my birthday and we tried on a concert frock and I got so hot I played only in a chiffon slip and you stared hard, and the lilies smelt so strong, and Amar Ben who came in smiled and smiled and could not take his eyes off my shoulders and neck. You said I live for applause, but you know in your heart of hearts that I hate it. I'm too proud. Though I am shy and frightened.

A question occurred to Max as he read Helen's letter: Could there be a survival of personality? Could God permit such vanity to survive? Surely a little rash of Him!

Remember [she continued] we are both young, we two, I mean, and Heaven knows what lies before us! Victor arrived from Biskra yesterday and says they're all thrilled about my playing there tonight. What would Hardy and Anatole France not give to be alive tonight and hear me. Poor Lord Cornet, he has not been able to come, and writes he is disconsolate. I am his greatest love. You don't give much to your fellow human beings, do you?—All my love and to hell with you! *Toujours*. . . . SONIA.

After all, he thought to himself, he was marrying them all. Another man would have made a clean sweep of them. Helen was only a visitor who had overstayed her welcome. Phyllis and Sheila, respectively, he had

saved from a brute and a cad. There was a limit to presuming on a young man's . . . yes, a young man's good nature. Damn them all!

He now thought how best to prepare Comfort for the inevitable discovery that he had a wife and three other companions and that she was to be the fifth and the dearest. He tried this way and that way, but only succeeded in being tentative and involved. Then, deeming frankness the best course with so open-minded a being as Comfort, he plunged straight into the subject —but became inarticulate.

"Speaking candidly ——" Speaking candidly, he did not get very far. "The 'big idea' is —— Well, you know ——" He stopped short lest she did know. . . .

"What is it?" She raised her eyes. "I'm almost beginning to suspect you have a wife tucked away in that little Arab house of yours." She laughed.

He laughed too.

"You remind me of Levin in *Anna Karenina,* screwing himself up to confess his past to the blameless Kitty, failing in courage and giving her his diary to read. Quite in the taste of the nineteenth century."

That was the spirit! Just like him to err on the side of timidity, to underestimate what these modern girls could stomach! There was nothing unusual in his situation, and Comfort would be the first to laugh at his diffidence when he had told her everything. "Fact is"—he cleared his throat—"there are two or three others, girls, I mean, I am rather fond of—that is, feel

responsible for. And—how shall I put it?—the idea is —it has been suggested—that we might all become Mohammedans. Ostensibly. You know what I mean? This would regularize our relations, ha, ha!—make them unimpeachable in the eyes of man and Allah alike." (The saving grace of humour, nothing like it!)

But she looked at him in blank wonder. He was conscious for the next few minutes of prolonged mute scrutiny. At last she spoke: "I had no idea there were others. Are you joking?"

"It's absurd, of course. I mean it does in fact rather sound like a joke. I've really only got Phyllis for whom I feel responsible. And Sheila, if you like, whom I once had to rescue from a certain young cad. As for Helen—she plays the harp, you know, an unpopular instrument —she came of her own accord. Not my fault . . . that she finds the desert life congenial, I mean."

"H'm," she said and looked away out to sea. "Evidently I am marrying a much-sought-after person. The wonder is there isn't a wife as well! I'm quite prepared for it after this."

"Well, there is," he said, grinning foolishly.

She looked at him curiously.

"But don't worry. She is not there. For the rest, we get on marvellously. All nice girls—darlings. My heart yearns over them. And nature!" He pushed a little cry of contentment. "What dawns! What sunsets! Thrilling rides into the desert. At night weird native orgies by the Ouled Nails. A full, primitive life. Nothing is

lacking for the happiness of man or woman. We only need you for complete bliss."

"I see, you believe in the many, the One in the many. It's a tenable philosophy and I can guess by what a succession of triumphs it has been evolved. Still, I pity you. The nature of your pleasure seems to be not so much cumulative as accumulative."

Max sighed. "Life!" he said. "Pending heaven. . . ."

"Pending heaven. . . ." She seemed to meditate deeply, scratching the gravel with his stick affectionately, yet dubiously, as she did so. They were out on the Promenade de la Croisette. The morning was mild, the water unruffled.

"Don't you see," he said, "the difficulty of getting a divorce from my wife would be obviated by a Mohammedan marriage which might include my three other companions, loyal girls every one of them, and you'd be my dearest, my truest, my best love, in actual truth my only wife. After all, two intellectuals like us ought to be above mere convention. I have never believed in progress, in the myth of enhancing the happiness of multitudes. I have always concerned myself with accentuating my own nature and thereby producing genuine authentic work that others might get pleasure from. But I do most sincerely believe in helping those nearest one, in being kind to people in one's immediate proximity. And if everyone did the same it would make for a happier world. Then let me plead on behalf of my loyal companions who want

to remain with me, to whom your advent would mean a holy bond of . . . of sisterhood." He choked with emotion.

She did not speak.

"You think me frivolous," he said. "But, forgive me, that is a frivolous view to take about some one who has suffered his share. The life in time is a curse—a punishment of the inferno. Consider the cunning, heinous torture. Time is a succession of moments, each so brief that it admits but of a staccato sensation. If we try to draw out an emotion that seems beautiful, we get only a quick succession of the same staccato note, till one's heart and head sicken of the monotonous din. Can you blame us if we divert ourselves with a melody?"

"No," she said. "No, I don't blame you. But if, in this world of time, I cannot be a melody for you, I don't wish, I positively do not wish to be one of a succession of staccato notes."

There! there! he thought. He had been overconfident, like yesterday at the Casino when he had banked on red because red had come out three times in succession and he thought his luck lay that way. It had worked three times in succession: but the fourth woman had evidently turned him down, while he would have burnt an offering of all three for the fourth alone! And happiness had seemed so near, so possible!

He swallowed a lump. "In this life," he said, "spiritual things are objectified. For me you objectified hap-

piness, that heaven which had been pending so long that I almost thought it was mocking me. And I shall know no heaven without you," he said, with a catch in his voice.

LI

They dined, strolled on the sea front, lunched, dined again. Comfort seemed to encourage his pleading with her, yet shook her head or said nothing. As towards nightfall his energy began to wear out, she became aware of a prickly weariness in his demeanour. "Anyhow, this is the conclusion I've arrived at," he would say as if, she thought, he had been solving some mathematical problem which admitted but of a single correct solution, "and it's to the benefit of all concerned."

" 'Concerned!' Why should *they* concern themselves about us two?"

"The whole point is there are more than two."

"Three?"

"Four."

"Five. Six," she laughed, "counting your wife."

"I beg of you," he flared up, "don't make a farce of it!"

"It's too silly," she said, "even for a farce—I mean my coming out on a wild-goose chase. When I think how far I have come from, what fine, unmixed feelings brought me to write you, well . . ." Her eyes filled. "I do not stop thinking of your books and re-

membering how I love them—except I almost do when I think of you."

He waited patiently for her emotion to subside, and then, like a man who has business to transact and little time to waste, he went on. "After all," he pleaded, "it isn't just a trivial idea or a whim. I have given weeks of profound thought to it. And not I alone. All the four of us have considered the question from every conceivable aspect; pondered upon it in our secluded retreat, far from the madding crowd, so to speak. I don't wish to draw obvious analogies, but it is no exaggeration to say that I, like another before me, communed in the desert. I've given it days and nights of sustained meditation," he concluded with a sudden ring of irritation in his voice, "and polygamy is the solution I've come to. I do think it unkind of you to reject it after all the trouble I've taken."

Comfort thought of an old family solicitor who had said the same thing to her when, after her father had died, she rejected his advice because she thought it unsound; and her old irritation with the solicitor reinforced her new irritation with Max. "This is really too absurd—I mean my having to take your advice simply because thinking seems an effort to you."

"Go on," he cried, "go on. If you want to be obstinate there's nothing to stop you from finding fault with the Garden of Eden. Damn women! . . . Sorry. My nerves are on edge." He took off his hat and wiped his Shakespeare forehead with a handkerchief. "I can but

reiterate my opinion that the advantages of monogamy are greatly exaggerated."

The conversations continued—*"pourparlers,"* he called them, ironically. "Rapallo would have been a more fitting place for them."

"I am as tired of it as you are."

Finally, so much was won and conceded. Comfort was to come with him to the desert in the capacity of "good-will ambassador," meet Phyllis, Helen, and Sheila, and see for herself how matters stood. "That's all I ask."

It was devastatingly hot when they were approaching Bou-Saada. A sirocco had caused a sandstorm and Comfort had a headache. "The desert isn't at all what I imagined it to be."

"Nothing ever is."

"Yet I know," she said, "there is no promise in the world without fulfilment. If you want a thing, it means you can get it; you would not feel the want of it did it not exist; it draws you on because it exists."

"Perhaps," he said.

Max was unpleasantly surprised—though Helen, he remembered, had apprised him of the fact—to find Victor on the premises. "Ha!" Max said, beholding his guest. "Still in the phenomenal world, I see! How far you are from the Absolute, Victor!"

Victor said something appropriately funny, because all the four girls laughed simultaneously; but Max

did not want to hear what it was, deeming that a reply neither adds to nor subtracts from an observation which is complete in itself. Victor, with an eye for colour, was suitably dressed in pale khaki drill designed for tropical wear. The sight of him thus attired annoyed Max, who had spent two years in the desert wearing out his old shirts and shorts, the old Harrovian blazer, and the Panama hat. When they were sitting down to a meal, Max clothed his suspicion in a gloomy raillery. "When the prophet Samuel," he said, "came to Bethlehem by command of the Lord, the elders of the town trembled at his coming, and said, 'Comest thou peaceably?' Likewise, we question you, 'Is it peace and good will that your coming signifies, O Seer?'"

"Yea, peace."

"I'm not so sure."

"Nor I," Victor laughed, looking admiringly at Comfort. She was dressed in a green velvet cardigan which showed off her slim figure, and the look in her eyes changed perpetually from gravity to fun, and always her face seemed to be lit with a hidden intelligence from within. Helen, Phyllis, and Sheila spied her movements with a mixed look of appreciation and envy. Comfort and Helen discovered that they had a common friend in the person of an eminent statesman. "Have you heard lately from the Prime Minister, Miss Sapphire?"

"No, he doesn't write to me now."

"Why is that?"

"I think it's because his wife is jealous," said Helen. And, perhaps to enhance her appearance against Comfort, she, all in white, had already embraced her gold harp. And in truth she was superb as she sat there, her slim legs projecting on either side of the unwieldy monster. There was something appealing about it, as if she was hard put to it to keep the gilded dragon in his place. Tender, beautiful, she had subjugated the inhuman thing, bewitched him, and was rending his heart. The room grew still. Comfort and Sheila, Phyllis, Victor, and Max, sat on rugs and divans in striking attitudes expressing competent understanding, a contemplation of the mysteries of life and death, and a longing for the fugitive graces of a world palpably not ours. Max, watching her, thought that human beings expressed themselves with more dignity and grace on the strings of a musical instrument than through the medium of their own organs.

Helen released her grip on the harp, which tilted forward to a standstill. She looked round and smiled her shy smile of self-approbation. Enthusiastic applause. Polite enquiries as to the title, the author of the work. A few fitting remarks as to the execution. They were back in the phenomenal world.

Victor took Max aside; he was curious to know what Max made of Helen—the second woman, please note, acquired through his, Victor's, good offices! How had he found life with her? Congenial?

Max's brow wrinkled in acute concentration. "Ye-e-e-e-e-s," he drawled. "I know. . . . Ah! Life! Life!"

LII

"And how are you, Phyllis?"

"She's the mainstay of this establishment," Max replied for her. "The *mater familias*. I've avoided begetting children by my other wives."

"Why, do you think Pam and Ben are yours?" Phyllis exclaimed, laughingly.

"Do you know"—Max tapped his forehead with his palm—"I almost imagined they were! How time flies!"

"I don't want any children yet. I've my career, all my life before me!" Helen interjected. "I'm the artist," she waved a hand in the air, "too much in the clouds, you know."

"You should let others say that," Sheila proffered.

"She's the black sheep of the family," Helen indicated to Comfort. "The ne'er-do-well."

"The ne'er-do-anything," Phyllis corrected.

"They all bore me." Sheila turned round to Victor. "I don't mind *you,*" she tossed over her shoulder to Comfort as she went. She liked the way the American girl wore her clothes.

Helen, conscious of Max's presence, sustained a genial conversation with Victor, presenting him, by contrast with Max, as a financial success, which Victor

denied. "Still, you make quite a lot of money in royalties," said Helen.

"Royalties!" Victor shook his head. "When the literary agent and the state have taken their toll of the royalties, the author is left with a few coins in the palm of his hand which he surveys with a kind of half-playful, half-wistful meditativeness. His real money is made promiscuously, in odd ways."

"In what ways?"

"In unconventional ways." That girl must be worth something! "In ways," said Victor, as it were meditating the subject to himself for the first time, "which may be regarded as tributaries of the main flow running outside the boundaries of pure literature, but owing their contents to the mother river."

Max looked up with interest. "What are they?" he asked.

"Well——" Victor paused; he was contemplating a subject which was new to him and he had to make shift with his thinking. "Well—pickpocketing, if you like."

"But why pickpocketing?" Comfort's questions were serious. "How is pickpocketing assisted by a gift for literature?" She smiled to show that she realized this might be nonsense, but was not insensible to that aspect of it which possibly elevated it into that higher realm called "divine nonsense."

"Well," said Victor, still thinking painfully, "a writer is nothing if he is not a psychologist. And

psychology is of assistance to the would-be pickpocketer. It may help him to divine the location of the pocketbook by an inner intuition of the character of the man he wishes to pickpocket. He will know the type of man who carries his pocketbook in his hind trousers pocket. They are, I think, quite often pederasts —on the whole, to be avoided."

Max did not warm to Victor's attempts at humour. But Comfort seemed charmed by Victor's high spirits and egged him to go on relating his adventures in Tunis. There ensued a long monologue, during which Victor turned more and more towards Comfort.

"You're inventing," said Max.

"Not a bit. I'm a *surréaliste*. I warned my young guide, for the love of Allah, not to lead me into needless extravagance. They work on a commission basis, and try to make you disgorge. 'You see, my lad,' I explained, 'the cheaper you make it for me, the more I'll pay you.' He said he understood perfectly, and we set out in the moist heat of the evening through dismal streets, and presently knocked at a door. A flinging open of windows in the dark. Husky, questioning voices, 'Who's there?'

"'*Riche anglaise!*' shrieks my guide—the feminine by way of emphasis, I suppose.

"'All right. Enter!' A fat, ogling hostess. In come the girls. What will you stand them—beer? coffee?

"'Champagne,' suggests my guide. Then the selection—young things—but somehow unappetizing."

"Plainly dirty," from Max.

"That's it, Max, dirty. And wilful. Not submissive. More comedy than lust. Knocks at the door. 'Hurry up!' Laughter. The mother, anxious for the welfare of her daughter, demands a share of the profits. The proprietress demurs. The guide dissatisfied with his commission. All parties seeking to saddle the client—the 'consumer.' Stand a bottle of lemonade—heh? Voices. Altercations. Sordid, my dear Max, sordid! . . . "

Max listened unamiably, suspiciously. "Well, if you will go to these places——" He did not much care, it seemed, for Victor's account of his exploits. When Victor said he thought of including such bits of experience in a work of fiction, Max scarcely responded at all. Victor heard him make such remarks as: "Well, old man, that rather depends on the treatment." "Well, that depends on whether you make it plausible." "Well, that would depend on . . . whether you can carry it off."

"You're a fool, Max," Helen said, afterwards. "He's come to take your girl away from you. See how charming she is with him. I wouldn't trust her . . . or him."

"He wouldn't do such a thing, in his friend's house."

"Ha! That's exactly what he'd love to do, you simpleton. You know why, of course?"

"Why?"

"In revenge for your having taken me from him."

"True: I've taken Phyllis."

"Oh, that! I dare say he's grateful to you now. But he hates you, loathes you for having abducted me."

"I didn't. You came."

"Because you wanted me, you silly. Sonia knew. . . . How he must hate you!" She clenched her teeth and narrowed her eyes. "He loved me so desperately. . . . I suppose there's something in me which holds a man."

"There must be . . . considering the temptation to get away."

She glanced up at him as if afraid she'd been hit by the bullet; then smiled. "Yes, Max, I too hate this place. Let's flee together!"

LIII

Because Max deemed that Comfort should have the best room in the house, Phyllis and Helen shared one room together. He desired to make Comfort's sojourn as diverting as possible. He had conducted her to the market place, shown her the native house and the shop of local wares, organized an expedition on dromedaries to the dunes, and in the evening Comfort witnessed a performance of the native dance by the Ouled Nails. When this was done there seemed little else one could do.

Victor appeared to do most of the talking. "One woman's meat is another's poison," Max heard him say as he entered the room. "Chastity, like everything else, is relative. A woman's aversion to sex, a man should

never forget, may, for all he knows, be confined to himself."

Comfort at that looked at Max and said, he thought with deliberate cruelty, "That is very true."

Why had she looked at him? And if she had not meant to be cruel (which was a passing mood), how much worse if her thought was sincere. He pulled himself short of asking her, "How could you possibly offend me so?" For by doing it, he realized, she had already shown it to be within the scope and competence of the humanly possible.

He already felt that everything she said acquired a heightened significance, that it cost her nothing to hurt him. Outwardly, Max showed a tired amiability. Inwardly, he was already rolling downhill. Gradually he was coming to see, his vision was narrowing itself to a thin, dazzling ray of light which illumined the truth—that he could not have *all* the women in the world. And there was only one more woman he wanted, and she would not be his. All his successful affairs with women who responded to his demands had quickly exhausted his interest before having crystallized into love, and had faded away; but now, for the first time, his infatuation, checked at the crest, had flowered into a grievance which racked him; and it seemed to him that all his life he had loved unhappily and that the ardent emanations of a tender heart had been cold-shouldered and repulsed. And she had written to him

—how short a time ago!—that she was sharing the spring with him; and now verily it was autumn.

Her letters, once a promise of ideal beauty, now seemed to him precious, clumsy, inflated, and only showed too plainly what she was. And because she was intellectually worthless he felt the slight of her wearying of him the more painfully; he wanted to grip her savagely by the wrist: "You worthless impostor, you! You dare drop me, me who am much too good for you." And that the privilege of decision, the right to err, lay with her, not with him, added injury to the insult.

And the more he stormed, the more she was tempted to be calm and "reasonable," as if feigning the necessity of keeping a cool head in a storm; and so got the better of him. And though he knew it, he could not do otherwise, because when he too essayed, painfully, in short breaths, to be reasonable, she could afford to remain reasonable—that is, indifferent—long enough to defeat him. In his effort to renew her jealousy of his other companions he failed utterly. "It doesn't matter at all," was her comment, "as I am indifferent."

"Reasonably or unreasonably, indifference is what we desire least from the people who have hurt us."

He assumed, at first bitterly, then humbly, that his company irritated her. She did not deny it. A being we love has a leverage on our suffering. It is indefensible to apply her hand to it. And how he hated her when she did. His attitude degenerated into "I suppose it's

no use my asking you now ——" Or he would try to catch her, make her act on an old promise: "But didn't you say in your letter, 'If this is boring to you I shall not transfer my allegiance to anyone I can think of'?"

"That was long ago," she replied. "I have changed."

That she should have listened to Victor's boastful exploits without disgust—well, that again showed what she was. What a turncoat! And how little it had cost her to change her spiritual allegiance, which had taken four years to crystallize into a resolution to write to him, only to be exchanged six months hence like one pair of shoes for another. He begged to believe he was not blind, though he preferred to say nothing at present. The man and the writer! Trust a woman to back the man every time. And now Victor was her hero, her literary god. Why? Because he was young, slim, unattached? Ah, well, he, Max, could not quite ignore, though he had tried, her look on first seeing him on the landing-stage at Monaco. The man and the writer! Perhaps not quite the man, eh? But one grew older. Was it one's fault?

And he grew physically self-conscious, forgetting his self-satisfied air in the days when she loved him. It seemed to him that, in inverse ratio to his sense of smallness and unworthiness, he swelled in size till he was like a mountain, so that, should he have attempted any intimacies with Comfort, she could have kept him at bay by a single analogy.

And, as before, when she worshipped him, she had

been self-conscious and involved in expression, now she was direct and quick-witted. To attenuate his particular pain by elevating it into the general and drown his humiliation in mental conceit at the expense of herself and his rival, he had intended to say: "What does it matter? We shall all die and be forgotten. You will be forgotten in ten years, Victor in a hundred, and I in a thousand." But he had only got as far as, "You will be forgotten in ten years," when she quickly said, "And you in five."

"Not without merit," he laughed. "Ah, well, the longevity of fame is in inverse ratio to the immediate respect one inspires in one's contemporaries."

"And the hope of it," Victor interjected, "equal to the feeling of resentment at one's unsuccess in love and letters."

He left them, as he now always tended to do, to each other, and went out into the road, feeling that he was being made the scapegoat of everybody's evil passion, taken advantage of right and left. And suddenly the Captain and the horse—a characteristic incident!—came back into his mind. He must really put a stop to everybody's exploitation of him. And he decided that very evening to write to Mme. Pétain that he was determined to take a firm line about the horse and would suffer no more dilly-dallying over the trap, which she must at once get back from the Captain and keep locked in her shed, till one saw one's way to disposing of it in the open market. That was that!

And now that his blood was up and he felt equal to dealing with rogues and impostors, he would also take a firm line with Victor Thurbon. He, Max, had brought her thus far, and would have kept her but for that thief . . . abusing the laws of hospitality which—did he not know?—were among the most sacred. . . . Damn the fellow! Making him lapse into *clichés!* And Phyllis and Helen and Sheila, how could they not feel that they were a burden to him? "To remain, to persist in remaining when one is no longer wanted, not to feel that one is no longer wanted, is something *I* shall never understand," he said aloud to himself, striding home. He now tried to think in what circumstances these three women had come to live with him, and puckered his brow in the effort. "Now let me think . . . Phyllis . . . yes. Sheila . . . yes. Helen . . . should never have been allowed!" And he decided that he would make a clean sweep of them, banish Victor, and, yielding to Comfort's prejudices on the subject of marriage, begin a new life with her. He would go in now, say nothing, and then spring the bomb on them.

But before he could speak he was confronted by a shocking piece of news. Comfort and Victor informed him that they had decided to get married.

"What!" he said, and he fumbled for some word which would express the enormity of the shock, a felony which, because it was nameless, he could find no name for, except a rising flood of weeping tears.

He essayed speech, his hand fluttered hopelessly; he rushed out of the room.

Helen, moved by his look of despair, consoled him, as it seemed to her, generously. After all, if he had lost Comfort he still had the three of them. She made it "three" to magnify the consolation by a sense of numbers, though she herself considered Phyllis and Sheila could be picked up at two a penny; while he thought that but for his lingering loyalty to the three of them, he could have married the one woman he loved.

There was nothing for it but to take a stick and go—and the farther the better. But he paced the floor up and down several times and then said to Helen, reproachfully, "You could have warned me."

"I did."

"You didn't."

"I warned you he was desperate about my not going with him."

"Oh," contemptuously, *"you!"* His own hurt informed him he had hurt her; but he couldn't pause. "Later," he thought, "I must be kind to her."

"Me. Your little Sonia," she said with tender petulance. "I could see in his eyes . . . a look . . . imploring me to go away with him."

He stared at her dully. "Why didn't you?" He saw this very nearly stabbed her, but was parried again by her armour of vanity.

"Because," she said, laughing with unnatural gaiety, "you silly, because I wouldn't leave you."

"Why?"

"Because I am not that kind of woman. I wouldn't leave a man who loves me in the lurch. The poor lamb knew it, so, I suppose, he had no choice but to content himself with the second best."

Walking was no good, apparently; he must flee or he would go out of his mind! It was strange; he did not believe what she said in respect of her own claims; yet he did not doubt her word in respect of Victor's intentions. On that love-soaked ground his footsteps seemed tortuous and heavy. The sky loomed unduly with omens; the air was heavy with importance. His sense of probability was leaving him; human motives were magnified or distorted to suit now a hope, now a fear. He was in the hands of invisible demons.

Wasn't Victor the wolf? The wolf who under cover of hospitality . . . Well, never mind. He was not in the mood for making images. He was becoming obsessed with suspicion, he who in former days discredited all plots and conspiracies; for Helen had laid a seed in a fertile soil of his mind, and the seed had fermented and taken root. He already had no difficulty in believing that it was revenge for his having deprived him of Phyllis and Helen which had actuated Victor in pouncing on Comfort when he, Max, was not in a position to hold her. How mean! But he also believed that Victor had deliberately saddled him with

Phyllis and Helen to add to his disgrace. A diabolically clever trap in fact, and he, the fool that he was, had tumbled into it. And that other bounder—what's-his-name——Roy Marcus, had saddled him with Sheila, whose latest affectation was that she was "just a plain, ordinary, normal woman"! Victor had contested neither Phyllis nor Helen nor Sheila. But he was quick enough to come on the scene when he sensed that there was money. Max felt that he had been kind to them and that they had laughed at him for his kindness. And his sensitive pride could not endure being thought a simpleton by the wolves of this world. Unless he humbled himself into mysticism by rising above worldly considerations, as Descartes, who said: "Whenever I am offended I raise my soul so high that the offence cannot reach it"—unless he was prepared to go the full height of these spiritual exercises, Max could not settle down to the situation. By losing Comfort he had indeed, in the real sense of the word, lost comfort; and he thought that Comfort herself, who had been wooed not for herself, but to spite him, had been betrayed no less than himself and could never be happy.

He left suddenly one morning while all the others were asleep. The sky was clouded and the passengers reclined moodily in their seats. In the middle of the desert they passed two Arabs who had a serious quarrel. "No doubt, a woman in it," he thought. Each

man hit the other at intervals across the head with a big long stick. Their heads were turbaned, but imperfectly, for the stick came down with a loud dry crack. The recipient staggered under the blow, then slowly recovering as if from a trance, in turn brought down his stick with a sharp crack on his opponent's skull. Neither followed up his first blow with a second, but seemed to wait till the other was recovered sufficiently to deal him a blow on the head. The fight went on in the middle of the desert, far removed from any human habitation, from the League of Nations, went on leisurely, perseveringly, as though they were at work on something constructive, requiring concentration of mind. The auto-car was approaching the gorges, but far away on the dim sandy horizon the quarrel went on; one might almost have thought two blacksmiths were at work with hammer and anvil. Away, away! Away from fleas, dust, brutishness, alms-begging, sores, overloaded donkeys, human cunning and ingratitude! Away on the winds of disgust!

LIV

In Algiers he looked up Oda, but found she had vanished. It had suddenly occurred to him that the *dispensaires* might have nabbed her. Poor girl! Was she confined with other native girls, as illiterate as herself, trying to pass a message to him, and in vain?

His heart ached for her. He paced the streets of Algiers. He sought her, but he could not find her; he called her, but she gave no answer. "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell her that I am sick of love."

Perhaps she no longer cared for him, had, since he last saw her, multiplied lovers, offered herself on the pavement, even joined a house of ill fame? No matter, he needed her. And she, who knows? Perhaps, on her way to meet him, resolved to chuck her ill beginnings, henceforward to be his and his alone, drunk at the thought of turning a new leaf, feeling the need to communicate her resolution, she addressed the first who came along—a gentleman in a fur coat—was marked by the police and registered indelibly as now of the profession. How sad, how tragic! These awful *dispensaires* who prowl about the town and pounce upon beginners, making professionals of débutantes. And now she was interred in that huge barrack, subjected to a medical examination, waiting, waiting for him to deliver her. He would force his way in, denounce, shake his fists at them, have her innocence proved on the spot, cherish her, take her to England and have her presented at Court. Hither and thither his thoughts flowed, and it made no difference to him whether she was innocent or unduly experienced: if she be, as well might be the case, all the world's darling, she was akin to a sister of mercy,

human and universal, at once intimate and impersonal, like love, like charity, like the First Cause. . . .

Then suddenly he came across her under the arcade of shops in the rue Michelet. No, she laughed, nobody had nabbed her. She had got a job in the *Hôtel de la Régence* as assistant dish-washer, and also mopped the second and third floors every morning, and kept her room at the top of the Arab house to sleep in. Today was her afternoon off. Relieved, he followed her thither, and he noticed in the bright sunlight how the fleas jumped from her bed on to the chair on which he had hung his clothes; one, two, three, four—they jumped adroitly across. How vexatious! It seriously interfered with his enjoyment. But what a nice girl withal she was. He gave her three hundred francs as a parting gift, adding that he was not rich. She said money was not everything. She did not hold with girls who only said, "Give, give, give!" Max remarked that her girl friends must wonder why she didn't manage to get more money out of him. Exactly, Oda agreed with quick eagerness, that was what they did say: to have the unusual good fortune to strike on an *anglais* for a lover, and then to have the equally unusual misfortune that the same *anglais* should be without a sou.

When he left next day he impressed on her that it would be wiser if she did not come to see him off. And indeed he saw no trace of her among the European crowd that had come down to the water's edge to wave farewell to their friends sailing back to France.

But in Paris he got a letter from her, dictated by her to the daughter of the *concierge*.

Dear Max F. Fisher [evidently copying his visiting card], you told me not to come to see you off, but I could not help myself. You didn't see me, but I saw you and I saw the boat go out and I was sore at heart. I am all right again, don't worry, but I also ask myself what you are doing over there as I can see nothing.

MADEMOISELLE ODETTE

He flung himself down, with a sigh, in a corner seat of the Paris train, as one who had long sojourned in savage lands and is glad to be back once more in congenial Mother Europe! Pain? While there was life there was pain. There seemed no help. The soul must needs remain exposed to the winds. Fortify it all round, a secret stream will reach it, will undermine it. Build your impregnable fort: you build on marshland, and the Soul is water.

The long-nosed passenger opposite seemed to be sneezing and coughing a good deal, then lay shivering in his blanket. Such a nuisance! The papers reported an increase in the grippe epidemic. Spanish influenza was said to have taken a heavier toll in lives than the Great War itself. He hoped the long-nosed passenger was not a prospective victim.

In Paris he wrote to Lysette and received a rebuff from her mother, who said that Lysette was away in a convent, and what were his intentions in writing to her? "The old ponce of a woman!" he said to him-

self. "Interfering with a young man's zest of life." But there was not much zest in him; his vitality was low. Had the long-nosed passenger perhaps infected him?

He lay down, covered his head with the sheet. These epidemics. Revolting. Men of genius were not immune from them. A scavenger and Tchaikovski reported to have been the final two victims of a cholera epidemic in Petrograd. Better look out. A knock at the door. *"Entrez!"* roared Max. As the door opened, Max roared again.

Letters. He glanced at the envelopes. Helen. The other from Mme. Pétain, forwarded by Phyllis, without comment. Which might mean that Phyllis was angry, or might mean that she was grieved. The Captain had sold the old horse and paid Mme. Pétain on Max's account three hundred francs, deducting expenses for feeding it. When first she asked him for the money he began shouting, but when she said to him that so far he had always conducted himself like a gentleman—would he continue to be one now? he pulled himself up at once and his tone became irreproachable. He put down the money and required a receipt from her. The Rodérics had gone away altogether, no one knew where. After long delays the trap had arrived in Toulon, the freight, she regretted to say, coming to more than was realized on the horse. Loulou noticed that the cap on the left wheel was missing. A remittance would oblige.

He knew so well what he was going to read in the other letter. He opened it with a heavy heart, paused before reading. There would be more and more of Lord Cornet's love for her, of Hardy and Anatole France; the less she was sought the more passion and adulation would be coming to her across the horizon, the older, the plainer, the lonelier she grew. And through it all she must know. . . . She wrote of the dangers to which she was exposed in the desert since Max's departure, for the Arab chiefs, knowing she was defenceless, would now be tempted, of course, to kidnap her. The Mirabou on the dune had not disguised his admiration for her. She was thinking she had better come to Paris.

If she came to Paris, then he must flee to London!

Crossing the Channel to Dover, the thought of Oda recurred to him. Poor child, will she go on living in that little room with the fleas and will the *dispensaires* at last nab her? What will happen to her in the end?

He closed his eyes; Oda knelt by his side and pointing tremulously at the English coast, entreated him not to take her there if there were *dispensaires*. But he took her *café-au-lait* hands in his own and calmed her. "In England there is cricket, my sweet, and there are golf handicaps—but no *dispensaires*."

There was a cold wind which cut him in the face, and he felt his limbs were sodden, his body damp and clammy, and he could not muster up enough resistance to the gloom which was invading him.

Out of the fog emerged cliffs, lone outposts of England, a land of cricket . . . and no *dispensaires*.

LV

The sudden disappearance of the host discomfited the guests in the desert home. As no one pressed them to stay, Victor and Comfort, after a while, decided that they had better go. The anxiety of Phyllis, the wounded pride of Helen concealed under favourable surmises, the "unconventionality" of Sheila flaunted in everyone's face—"So unfunny!" Victor decided.

Comfort agreed; and they, too, set back through the gorges to Algiers, across the sea to Marseilles, to Paris and London. He loved the touch of her, soft and supple. She came so . . . conformingly into his arms; her limbs, her outlines blended so well with his own, they might be one piece. And they already discussed the sort of guests they were going to ask, the sort of staircase they were going to have in their town house. ". . . You know the sort," he explained.

"Yes, yes."

What good taste the girl had! She agreed with him on every point. And if, perchance, she did not, how naïve, how delightful her error!

"Max's idea of a staircase," she smiled, indulgently, "was black marble."

Victor echoed her smile. "I used once to believe in him. I don't think he'll ever do much now."

"Not enough . . . how shall I say . . .?"

"Exactly!" said Victor.

"He has a place." And she thought how wise, how blessed had been her long-deliberated plan to write to Max Fisher, for had she not written to him she would not have met Victor. And that now was unthinkable. Everything seemed connected in a chain of inevitable events, the sun lighted benevolently from above, and life seemed reasonable. Their wedding was fixed for the twelfth of the month.

Victor had convinced her against an elaborate wedding. "No guests, please! No brutal extortion of presents! No ghoulish bridesmaids, peeping strangers, ready-made congratulations, 'Romeo' smiles! Please, no!"

And she agreed. The staging of a wedding, the conscious dramatization of a bridal night with its suspense, the artificially keyed-up high moment (so likely to fall flat), seemed to him in bad taste; and, like Napoleon with Marie-Louise, he possessed his bride spontaneously one sleepy November afternoon, when the countryside had closed its heavy lids for an hour, the sun was red, the chestnut tree a burning bush, and the swans on the lake a little bedraggled: that hour she was his, and still unmarried.

Then Victor was showing her the Tower, the Abbey, the "Mother of Parliaments." The people, he explained, did not govern themselves any more than before; but they thought they did. And that was all

that mattered. And here was Whitehall and 10 Downing Street—the Government which was there to register the nation's will. The nation may have no cohesive will and the Government would know how to get round it if necessary; still, they had a will of a kind which received a hearing of a sort, and if mistakes did occur they were well meant, and there was the Opposition to repeat them and grow mellow in office.

Adequate. Life was adequate. Now he was crossing with her into Piccadilly, and glad to find that the road repairs which had obstructed the traffic for several weeks had been completed and the barricades removed. "Next summer," he mused aloud, "they will repair Regent Street." How good life was! They will have an Hispano, flunkies, race-horses. . . . Yes, today he saw the poetry of things. The authentic side of things. His spirit, disengaged, was in love with form. Even the form of Victor Thurbon. His eye caught a poster—"The Life of Haig by Brigadier-General Charters." "Good," he said, "good." Here was Haig, admittedly not a genius. Nevertheless a commander-in-chief of an army. He had lived and died not without these events having been recorded in a book for such to pry into as may feel curious. Life was orderly, if uneventful. In his present honeymoon mood, on the eve of their acquiring landed property in Great Britain, he would rather it was so. And it pleased him, it added to his sense of neatness, that unimportant people kept

a record of the uneventful doings of unimportant men. All as it should be!

His childhood and youth had been spent abroad, and his education divided between Stockholm and Cambridge. His father had been very rich, but lost his money late in life. Thus Victor, though poor, behaved as one whom money could not astonish; a training which was to stand him in good stead with a rich wife. When one is born wealthy, subsequent poverty does not, he found, humiliate one. It is but a picnic lunch taken between regular repasts—be there never again a hot meal, be the remainder of one's days consumed *à la fourchette!* Victor's attitude had been one of patient waiting till his father's debtors had seen fit to restore him to fortune; and now his young wife had lovingly anticipated them. There was an aunt to meet, an uncle or two to placate, a sister to be nice to. Then clear sailing.

CHAPTER TEN

Broken Images

LVI

ARRIVED once more at Grosvenor House, Max at once took to his bed. The long-nosed passenger—Max could no longer doubt—had indeed infected him. The thought that he, Max, had not escaped the meshes of an epidemic which raged on several continents, that he, too, was about to be carried downstream, filled him with fateful solemnity. Very well, then! Serve them all right!

His body felt like an aching, tiresome acquaintance he could not shed; his mind, at a tangent with it, reeled as if in a vacuum. There passed before him, as he lay there in the sunlit room, his life which had brought him to this: his long, long childhood that had seemed would never end, a brief youth of agonizing promises, then manhood, so short and quick he hadn't been able to look round before he must already go. And when they came tomorrow —— " . . . *im*

Sarge lag ein toter Mann mit leidend sanften Mienen. . . ."

How soon it was over! And when he looked back upon the several phases of his life he scarcely recognized himself; the several Maxes he had been might be acquaintances. One Max after another developed out of recognition. That was the secret of development. It was something one could not foresee. Like a manœuvering army, it advanced upon you from a side you did not expect and took the fort of reason by surprise. As with algebra, which superseded certain laws of arithmetic, one thought, one state of being, dispensed with another, contracted identities—you were back in the miracle! And the life to come must be unimaginably different. Not thiswise *or* thatwise, but otherwise. . . . Nothing would ever surprise him in this world or the next. Through the window his eye caught sight of a perambulator on the balcony facing his own, a baby in it, and a young mother bent lovingly over her first-born. What tenderness, what youthful love! And if the child should lose her mother soon, may she not be wondering in the loneliness of youth, through the despairs of adult life, what the girl-mother who had given her life was like and if and how she loved and tended her. . . . But didn't he know? Couldn't he guess? The child in the pram was his Sheila; the young girl, her mother tending her first-born. Time was a figment. He had thought that everything in the

world had been pigeon-holed and divided; but here they were streaming together, and all life was one. . . .

"Come in!" He must keep watch over his mind; his imagination ran away with him.

Letters for him. Quasi-familiar writing. Oh, Life! Oh, Life!

Mme. Pétain wrote that, as there was no room in the shed, they had sent the trap to a furniture store, who charged eighteen francs a month for storing it. The furniture store was in Marseilles, not Toulon, for Monsieur Pétain thought there was a better chance of selling it there. However, a friend of theirs in Toulon said he wanted a trap and they wrote to the furniture store to send it back to Toulon, but three weeks had elapsed and the store refused to reply, and in the meantime their friend had purchased a little Citroën car instead. Nevertheless, Monsieur Pétain wanted Max to know that he would see the matter through to the bitter end.

The other letter was from Phyllis. In the desert home some uneasiness apparently was felt as to the future. Max had vanished, not unlike Tolstoy in his old age, weary, it seemed, of the empirical world. A break-up was impending. Helen had written to her agents in Wigmore Street; Phyllis had communicated with her mother in Birmingham; Sheila had telegraphed to Cæsar for a hundred pounds. On reading Phyllis's angry letter, Max thought to himself: Why could he muster no love for her? Why did her interest in him

chill him? He remembered how moved he had been by her account of her life, how interested in her recital of office routine in a firm of vacuum cleaners. How romantic it had all seemed when he was in love with her. She had changed, of course. But was that little more than an excuse? Had she not changed, he would have wearied of her all the same. And he knew that he was not to blame. Then who was? Why could we not keep the freshness of our first impressions? And yet there were men and women who remained in love through old age into death. Perhaps their intellects were less exacting. But there was Browning and Mrs. Browning. He, Max, was not so gifted, and that was an end of it.

Max's brain was a delicate thing. He could not meet successfully a series of crudely plausible but yet, in fact, unfounded accusations. His mind reeled under the outer onslaughts and the impacts of rage within, and broke down in anguish and disorder and, like a ship's screw jerked high above a wave, turned irresponsibly in lunatic flights.

He felt he had shouldered too many burdens. Like Don Quixote, he had, single-handed, undertaken too much. These women had made a scapegoat of him. He had sacrificed himself for them, and his efforts had been but scantily rewarded. And now the staunch ship that had borne them in a stormy sea was going under. They asked him for a message. They asked what they

were to do. His message was: "Save yourselves who can. Your ship is sinking."

LVII

Victor, he reflected, had not only taken his bride but it would seem his only reader. All his life Max had had "affairs" and was cynical about women. And now, for the first time, he had fallen in love deeply and in hopeless earnest. By an implacable spiritual law which, like a physical law, precludes one from opening a door when one's strength is not equal to the pressure from without, he could do nothing to help himself. For there was no help till he had learnt how to decipher the book of illusion, to read the impersonal beneath the personal, to drown the pain of the particular in the reality of the general. What was the use, he now asked himself, his blaming Comfort for lack of sympathy with him when in truth they were, so to speak, listening-in on different wave-lengths? If she was indifferent to his suffering, it was because circumstances had not "tuned" her "in." Comfort could not really be blamed for "insensibility" in a matter in which her sensibility had not been engaged; and all his passionate arguments and demonstrations of her meanness and cruelty, as when he said, "No! damn it, this is going a bit too far!" were passionate arguments, but arguments with himself.

It had become dusk. The great house was so mys-

teriously quiet. Bleak clouds, darkling sky. . . . He was beginning to doze off.

He awoke to a feeling of utter sickness at the thought of spending his remaining days without her. And when, in a welter of loneliness, he went to the window and looked outside, he saw at a top window facing him the crouched figure of an old woman in black (who, he had learnt, had served in the little stationer's shop on the ground floor but whose acute infirmity now tied her irretrievably to a solitary room upstairs) stare with vacant eyes down into the empty street below her. And he began to weep.

Then, for the first time, he saw him. Max was bent over the washbasin, and hot and cold water was streaming out of the twin taps. He stood (suddenly Max was aware of him) at his side, in his own attitude as if mimicking him; and in this parody was all the critical detachment which showed up the corruption and infirmity of his own prolonged attempt to cut a figure in Time. "So you are still here," the other's look seemed to say.

And suddenly Max knew that it was he himself who was the ghost, not the other. If others did not shrink at his approach it was because they, too, were ghosts in a ghost world. But the Being who was dreaming him looked on with tolerant detachment. And Max longed for the dream to end very soon—now—at once —and to be again the dreamer who has dreamt him and must soon awake. He dressed and went out into

the streets, past guttersnipes, butchers' shops, and everything seemed to him strange and unreal. This life sustained by the flesh of killed animals, can it be real or final? Ghosts crowded the pavements, drove past in buses and motor-cars, staring with uncomprehending eyes out of mortal sockets. It was Guy Fawke's Day, and two urchins with twisted blackened faces and collection boxes passed him, discussing eagerly methods of takings. What a world! Again that poster, "London Express Collides with Lorry." Painful for the lorry. A private motorbus hired by a school swayed slowly past him in the twilight, and inside little boys stood by the open windows and gazed wide-eyed at a world of wonders, and little girls sat huddled together, swinging their legs, rapt. "My darlings, why have you been launched into this world?"

When he saw another in the street he was glad that he had not to bear the brunt of that flesh also. He saw the Soul crouched in a taxi-driver. He saw it again subordinated to the driving of a bus. Absurd! He saw two men at dusk wheel home quickly a barrel-organ, having done their day's work. O Lord, was it necessary? Are you *sure* it is necessary?

That "are you sure?" on consideration, struck him as comic. There rose before Max the vision of a God who was not sure. A God who scratched uneasily the back of his neck, with the bewildered remorse of a scullery maid who had let drop an expensive soup bowl: "*Now* what have I done? . . ." With such a God

one could be human, shake him affectionately by the shoulder and say: "Indeed what *have* you done! Look at the porridge on the floor! Do you call that life?" And God was saddened, a little put out.

Edgware Road! Marble Arch. Indeed, indeed! Soldiers and girls and newspaper vendors. Tomorrow's posters. "Sunday Express," green and red. "Sunday Despatch," brown and black. "News of the World." Yes. But no news of the next. God's doings—mostly blessings in disguise. Well disguised, too. A thousand-pound prize for a correct forecast. Nobody has guessed since the world began. Harvey "The" Tailor. What a world! Harvey Distinctive Tailoring Fifty Shillings Harvey. What a world! What a world! More posters. "I Become a Woman Again, by Colonel Barker." "Unbridled Lust's Worst Sin." "Love, by Lord Castlerosse." —"Come, come. I am not unsympathetic. I am not unsympathetic . . . but now really!" And these tall new buildings round the Marble Arch. That cinema on the right, that tall block of flats on the left. "Now, now! Kind I am, modern I am. I still 'accept.' But do not push me too far."

He walked on into the Park. And here was his father. Preaching apparently to himself. Too bad! Not a man or woman, as they passed, stopped to listen. Yet the poor old man, who had sunk his savings in an annuity to serve God, must go on whether they listened or not. For some time he tried by word and gesture to attract an audience, but in vain. He stopped,

waited, and began anew. He sang a psalm in a thin cracked voice. No use! Finally, took off the oil-cloth with the biblical quotation badly scribbled in chalk, and began to pack up his soap-box, ready to go hence. While he was thus packing up, another old man came up to him and talked eagerly but inaudibly, evidently telling him it was no good, because old Fisher did not listen, but rolled up the oil-cloth morosely. It was a cold early evening in November, dim and windy, and the old man looked worn, shabby, pathetic. "What a world!" thought Max, and dashed across the grass as if pursued by satans.

"I must find her!" Suddenly his pain cried loud within him. "I must! I can't endure it any longer." But everywhere he went—from hotel to hotel—the booking clerk denied that any couple of that name were staying there. "She's in London," he thought, "dining somewhere at this very moment. Oh, anything for a glimpse of her. . . ."

Disheartened and fatigued by his fruitless search, he dined alone in the Savoy Grill. Ghosts sat about him, ate, waited, danced in the ballroom. And, by contrast, his own assumed warmth and reality and, on top of the food and wine (as always happens when we pander to the corruptible), a sense of self-importance. The ghostly waiter betrayed by his eyes that, like all of us, he fretted and suffered in his cold, clammy dream, and Max wondered to himself how pleasant it would be for him to find, as his dream draws to a close, that he

is not the dream but the Being who has dreamt him and can dream anew.

LVIII

Max waited till midnight, then paid and went home. A clouded sky, which seemed perpetually to withdraw in itself as if finding solace in its own profundity, sobered him. Watching it, one's soul grew homesick. Max thought of the little ache which every living human, apart from circumstances, carries hourly, now putting on a good face, giving a false smile—yet had a heavy heart. That man there, and there again that tattered old woman sitting on a stone bench next to a ragged old man, a new acquaintance, apparently: "There's always something somewhere, ain't there?" was her comment. His nod implied that it was so. And even that man sweeping the street. "Yes," he had said —his "yes" a horribly dubious yea-saying to life and existence in general. "We 'ave no bananas!" returned an old girl from the pavement—a cynic.

As he went, the nausea of living rose, like a tidal black wave, and threatened to choke him. Suddenly he felt very weak; his legs, he thought, were giving under him and he could not understand how it was he was not falling. "To die," he thought, "yes, but not here on the pavement." He felt that if he did not hold what remained of him tight in his two fists he would go to pieces here, now, among buses, pedestrians, newspaper

vendors, pavement artists, hooting cars, and the bits would be carried away by a swift delirious river, to a shoreless sea. "Not here. I must get home," he thought, raising his stick to arrest a passing taxi and nearly losing his balance as he did so. Sitting in it, he realized suddenly, with a kind of horror, how many things he must have done that were unnecessary; how many things he must have said that were unnecessary. But what remained? Reality? Such stuff as dreams are made of. Yes: the unreality of reality: it was only between those two states he could flutter, could breathe. For the real—this taxi, this street—was repugnant, endurable only because it was, again, unreal. One could not live in the Charing Cross Road without feeling that it was a bad dream. But faced with the solid reality of a timeless heaven, one must hope that this also might be a bad dream. And he understood that nothing could endure unless it was unreal: that endurance itself was unreal, and he was going away, far, far, never to return.

He paid as in a trance, and it seemed comic to him that he was parting with coins for which he could have no more use. Going up in the lift, a lady from the same floor reminded him to be sure to come tonight to Lady Maud's dance on the ground floor, in aid of the incurables; but he said he was himself past any mortal cure, and, entering his flat, locked the door, took off his shoes, his clothes—never again—and got into bed to die. He could hear Cæsar Zeitz, next door, continu-

ing to demonstrate the "will to live," apparently determined to outlive him, snoring sonorously, with unctuous pertinacity. Max knocked at the wall—knocked again, with bitter rancour. The snoring expanded, paused, subsided. Cæsar Zeitz's bed creaked reproachfully.

Then it seemed to Max that Cæsar's bed moved, and with it the room, the house, Max's own life, and that all this was receding, slanting away, like the coast watched from a ship, and would soon escape him, wrench itself loose, quite and for ever. But he, Max, stood on deck; a light breeze cooled his head, which was on fire. His brain raced at a dizzy speed, and he felt he wanted to speak very loudly and rapidly, do several things at the same time. "Good-bye, Cæsar!" Dying was exhilarating enough, if only the funks knew! . . .

How still his room. Two A.M. Still in Time.

It seemed to him he was standing on the kerb outside the Savoy Grill. He stood in the dark and they could not see him. But he could see her and Victor sitting at a table by the window. They were in evening dress; they had come perhaps from the opera and wanted to avoid the jazz music in the ballroom. He stood there on the kerb and could do nothing but look, while taxi-cabs drove in and out of the courtyard, and tears streamed down his face. What matter? There —they were coming out now. He stepped aside, and as they drove off he shouted after them, "Good luck!"

Why had he said that? Why did he love them? But he did, so that he fancied they might be himself. It was really the same. And when he thought of others he felt the same way, and his whole life unrolled itself before him, full of poetry. And it was strange: however dingy, dull, puerile, ineffective it all might have been, it now shone translucent with meaning. He thought of Sheila and Phyllis and Helen; of Oda and Lysette, and of Yvette on the wet beach of Juan-les-Pins. He thought of his wife. He remembered the Captain, the Rodérics, Mme. Pétain. And all the past seemed vivid, subtle, and touching; a chain of events: if he pulled at one end all of them shook and, like trees in the wind, they exuded a secret fragrance. Now he was a young man spending an April holiday in Vienna, and she—there she was! waving across to him because he had turned up at the wrong corner, and then walked by his side eating cherries and spitting out the pips at the passers-by, with a delightful unconcern for their glaring glances. "This is a world of love," all about her implied. "Hurry to love in the winter, and in the summer, and through all seasons!" And here she was arranging her hair before his mirror. "You are so pretty," he said, watching her as his heart pealed like a bell with happiness. "Do you think so?" And she was so dear to him that when they spoke of love they cried because their mortal hour had struck and they must step into their separate graves. He must appeal, appeal at once. They came in to tell him that

there was but One he could appeal to, and He was downstairs at the party. "I must find him," he said, and holding out an outstretched palm as if to say, "I'll be back, my dear, with all expedition and news of respite for us," he stepped into the lift and went down.

It was, to all appearances, one of those gate-crasher parties familiar in post-war London, for blue-coated attendants in satin breeches, buckled shoes, and silk stockings again and again conducted whole parties of uninvited guests to the front door, only to see them return in another hat, a different gown, an unfamiliar make-up.

There was a crowd, and one could see very little. Everyone was pressing forward to look; everyone was streaming in from the streets. Why should the toffs in their togs and plus-fours alone have the chance of seeing 'Im? But you could get no nearer to God than before. Pressing forward determinedly, craning his neck, now and then Max caught a glimpse of a distant figure in a frock-coat jammed in among the worthies on the dais. But the eager multitudes surged before Max, stepped on his toes, stood up on chairs, and he could never get a really good view of Him.

And indeed there they all were—the Leader of the Opposition arm in arm with Lloyd George and MacDonald, Lenin and Poincaré, and all knew that the time for strife was past, for the Last Judgment was over and God had stepped off the dais and mingled with the crowd. It was all over. God had forgiven

and told them all to go home; but the crowds would not disperse and stood waiting for things to begin. The life in Time, it had been decided, was to go on for the present. So Lady Maud waved a blanched hand and the band struck up a waltz. There was a string of ballrooms, as in a picture gallery, and each room had a band; and other rooms were turned into restaurants. And there was a crush and you were jammed between doors, and no one knew who was the hostess. He caught a glimpse of Noel Sitwell, and of the Cowards. And there was somebody who *was* Arnold Bennett and was *not* Arnold Bennett; and there was some one else whose name he could not remember who greeted him with outstretched hands and danced with him, all in green, her head a little to one side. Again the attendants had rounded up a party of uninvited guests and were conducting them to the door. The guests did not protest, but left peacefully, changed their make-up, and returned.

Max passed into the hall of mirrors which was a skating-rink. The skating-rink was of water, not of ice. And they were all skating, just fancy! skating on the water. He had already heard in a roundabout way that Jesus, over on His second coming, had been asked by Lady Maud, and as Max, who had now put on his skates, was diffidently cutting his way round the stadium, word passed that Jesus had been persuaded by Lady Maud to indulge in the exercise; and, in view

of the rumours current throughout centuries that He was a frail saint who couldn't carry His own cross, and thinking it politic to cut a good figure in front of the athletes to commend His gospel to them in the light of *mens sana in corpore sano*, Jesus had taken to the rink with the rest and was skating. And suddenly Max saw Him. Yes, Christ! There—a face luminous and otherworldly. Now he would not be able to deny it. Max passed Him; Christ was behind him, skating on the water. Good at the game. Max could feel on his spine the light of resurrection from the eyes of the Redeemer, and trembled in holy awe. He longed, but dared not look back. And as the temptation again overcame him he heard Christ's voice from behind him: "Go on. Don't look at me." And Max shuddered with fear at His holiness.

"Christ!" he cried. "I am frightened of you."

And Christ did not say, "Don't be frightened."

Then word was passed round that, in the wake of Lady Maud, Jesus had skated away. And Max was left with the old longing to overtake an early promise that had always eluded him and now threatened to escape him quite. It had been there all the time, but needed one note to fulfil it, to stop the sweet torment. "Oh, let me have it now: I have waited so long!" At the far end of the skating-rink there was a band; and Max made for the piano upon which a coloured gentleman was playing "Dinah, is there anyone finah in the state

of Carolina," and, to the dismay of the executants, begged: "Give me that note!" They looked at him, perplexed, because in the nature of syncopation, which was their *métier*, they must play many notes at uneven intervals: but he only thirsted for one note, the single note of fulfilment. They were slow in understanding. He groped with one finger, eager but uninstructed. "Give me that note," he begged, hoarsely. "My life to come depends on it!"

"Tiens! On a note like that?" The saxophone player smiled incredulously.

"Everything is in that note. Give me that note, I say, or I will perish cursing your works."

But he must not talk like that, knowing whom he was addressing. He felt that now that he was face to face with Him he must not falter. "Oh, still my longings of the earth: I am so weary." But the people round God did not seem to understand, and God Himself looked as though He thought the request a little unworthy: as though at the manœuvres before the All Highest war lord a recruit had suddenly stepped out of the ranks and complained of short rations. And the band whose music his demand had temporarily disorganized looked (he could not help seeing it) as though they thought his interference *un peu*—the saxophone player wrinkled his nose—*un peu . . . parvenu.* It wasn't done. Such insistence was, if they must use an unpleasant term, erotic.

He felt he had better propitiate Him. "O God, there is no health in me."

But they looked at him sternly. "Time!"

"What?"

"To step into your coffin."

"Oh, no!" he pleaded.

Those round God looked uncomfortable, as though they thought it improper of Max to have buttonholed God, whose position precluded Him from losing His urbanity in argument. It would have been more sportsmanlike of Max to take his chance rather than seek to ingratiate himself with God who, he must know, could read his mind like a book; and feeling this to be so, he abandoned the struggle.

"Then let me die!"

There was no comment on this. He was to be allowed that. That, yes. But not more.

Yet no one seemed greatly to bother about him. "How does one die?" he enquired lamely of the onlookers. A sympathetic bystander told him how it was done. One stepped into the lift; one pulled the door to, and it took you up.

"Thank you."

But what need had he of their lift? For had he not his trap? If it was still unsold there was a reason for it—that he might make use of it this mortal hour. But Emile came and said no, the wheel was off. How like life! What a lamentable fellow! No feeling for dénouement. The wheel off, when he wanted the trap to

ascend in. How absurd! But Emile grinned very stupidly.—"Why so pleased?" Because, said Emile, this was just like waking life—absurd or not, whichever way you liked to look at it. "Yes, yes," Max said. "Yes, yes," said Emile, "all bits and pieces. All the same, we know what they stand for."—"All broken images, yes . . ."—"The trap, too," said Emile, "all gone to bits. No use for anything."—"In that case," said Max, "I must avail myself of the public lift. What ignominy!"

But he owed them no thanks for the loan of their lift. None! And if there was any light in this vast darkness through which the lift was to project him, it was from this little lamp in him that he had lit, of human kindness and compassion, which the bleak, icebound, blizzard-ridden universe threatened to extinguish, forever. Forever! . . .

At the door he suddenly hesitated. Should he go and get his hat? There, in the cloakroom among the hats, was Cæsar, a dark hawk still sitting on the golden egg. "Give me the goods of this world, sir, that I may not curse you unduly." But the dark hawk—"the spirit that denies"—shook his plumed head. Max stood there, the others taking no notice of him, the band having struck up "Just to be with Dinah Lee." If he was to die, they could surely come and look—give him a decent send-off!

Sudden rage suffused him. He would *not* submit. Why should he? In life he had often submitted, weakly and unnecessarily. But this was not life. This was death,

something not to be trifled with. It was the bitter end. And he came again before God and the others: "I am Faust. I am Everyman. I will have none of that heavenly mockery. You disregard my earthly thirst. But why was I given these longings, this thirst? I protest. I protest, I say."

But they looked at him with stiff, tight, drawn-in lips. Their look enraged him. It enraged him that they should go on with the party when he was requested to quit. It annoyed him that all these self-complacent folk pretended to be individuals who thought that he was going to die and they go on living, when he knew that all life was one. He had been hoodwinked, taken in by the multifarious aspect of things and had believed that souls were like small coin. There had been too many mirrors about reflecting the Soul and he had believed that each mirror contained its own soul. But now, seizing a hatchet, he smashed all the mirrors, and behold: they reflected no soul.

And from above he looked at himself: who has broken my mirror? He saw the boy Marcel, the Captain, the old Rodéric, all, all; the partitions were gone, the mirrors were broken: he understood everything and he wanted to weep. But now already he could not utter a word and he let them do with him what they liked. The doors of the lift closed on him, and he was borne up out of sight, out of hearing. "Ah, well! And that's that."

"Well?" after a pause.

The lift went up and up, past the top of the house, past the roof, as if out of a tunnel into the twilight. It must have shot up many miles, for it had long since passed the eighth floor of Grosvenor House and was still shooting up: there seemed no ending. Time passed. The lift went up and up. And there he still sat, gasping for air, limp, lifeless, so young, and waiting for the end. Why so long?

The lift shot up out of the twilight into the light. The doors flew open and Max stepped out. And he who for so long had dwelt in twilight must at first avert his eyes as he came out into the light, into the morning. Into the morning!

The old life that had clung to him damply seemed to have tumbled to pieces like an old shell, a dried-up mould. He felt he was out, out of the narrow house, and could go where he liked, be what he liked. A blue sunny sky stretched above him, trees fluttered in the breeze, and he went, stick in hand, over dell and hill without looking back. And the farther he went the more clearly he understood that all these things—himself—were but symbols and metaphors of a miracle by whose dim candle he had read in the book of life a sorry page, confused and deceptive: and a nameless usher had closed the book and carried it away. "Yes," he thought, "I don't want it. I don't want anything."

THE END

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